

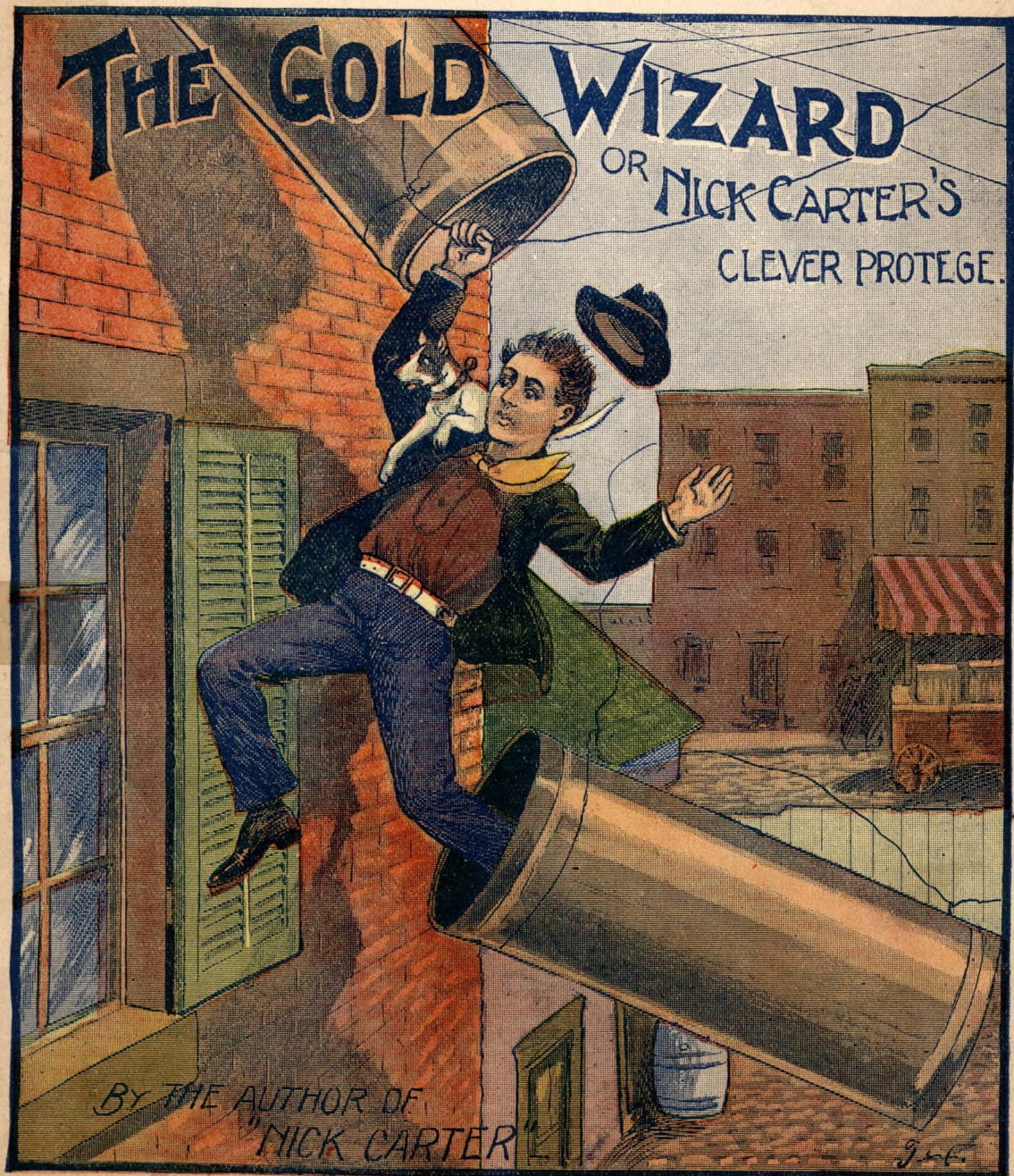
NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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AS THE SECTION OF THE PIPE THROUGH WHICH HE WAS CRAWLING GAVE WAY HE MADE A DESPERATE GRASP AT THE OVERHANGING WIRE.

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THE GOLD WIZARD;

OR,

NICK CARTER'S CLEVER PROTEGE.

By the Author of "NICK CARTER."

CHAPTER I.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

"Come at once before eight o'clock.
Have a good case for you.

"Nick Carter."

Brock Walters read the brief message just delivered by special messenger, and his eyes snapped over it.

A statement from that source always meant more than it promised, and there were not many boys who could proudly claim the friendship with New York's greatest detective, which it implied.

Brock had been busily engaged in measuring the distance between the eyes, probing the wrinkles, tracing the jaw line of a perfect plaster mask of a celebrated French criminal, and he was fascinated with his work, but he arose promptly.

The room he was in, the study of Armand, the world-famous physiognomist, was full of such things—faces, faces, faces—and Brock passed row after row of masks, skulls, portraits, to a cozy corner with a desk, where sat the great practical face-reader himself.

Brock had been here for a month, a sort of student at will. He received no salary, and had no regular hours, but Ar-

mand exacted attention and progress from a pupil, and Brock treated him as an employee and a friend.

"Mr. Arman," he said, "I have received this."

Brock presented Nick Carter's note, and the scientist scanned it casually.

"Ah!" he remarked, with a pleasant smile, "you are fortunate—you are again to be put on one of those intricate, delightful mysteries our friend Nick is pleased to term 'a case.' Good! When you return to resume your studies, let us see how far you have been able to apply to practical detective methods my system of reading faces, the all-important, unerring science of physiognomy."

"You can spare me?"

"If you can spare yourself."

"It may be only a day's shadowing—a few hours hunting up of a record. At all events, I do not wish to abandon my work here."

"You flatter me."

"That is, permanently."

"It would be a misfortune."

"Why?"

"Because you have caught the spirit of your task. Within another month, I guarantee to fit you so you can guess on sight the weight of a man's brain, his avocation, his temper, his weaknesses.

That is Nick Carter's strong point—I see a second edition in you of that great master of men, if you continue as studiously as you have begun."

"Thank you."

Brock left the queer office of his queer tutor with a brisk, elastic step, feeling a good deal as does a boy just let out of school, and anticipating "a good time."

Not that Brock considered detective business a lark. He knew better, and from practical experience; yet, since the first day, three months back, when luck had put him under Nick Carter's notice and marked inborn ability as an observer and reasoner had evoked the great detective's warmest approbation, Brock had entered into whatever detective duties fell to his lot with a zest and earnestness showing he enjoyed it from start to finish.

Brock had helped another of Nick's graduates in a case where some counterfeiters were run to cover, and had sustained a fall that laid him up for a week and lamed him for a month.

Nick had advised that he utilize his convalescence by "a term" with Armand, and Brock had hailed the proposition with ardor, had been dazzled with the real practical value of the science of faces, and thus it came about that he had to be sent for when wanted.

Now he was entirely recovered, and Nick had need of him! All kinds of delightful anticipations as to the character of "the case" mentioned filled Brock's mind as he hurried along the street.

He had fully half an hour to spare before the time fixed for the appointment arrived, but Brock had so many pleasant memories of a rollick with the boys in the splendid private gymnasium, an inspection of the detective's vast museum of criminal curiosities, an informal chat with the veteran thief catcher himself, that he simply wanted to fly to the congenial atmosphere of Nick Carter's cozy home.

Within one square of it, and with the house in sight, however, Brock halted despite himself, boy-like irresistibly attracted and entertained by an incident out of the ordinary. He was just nearing a small store, when its proprietor came out and seized the ropes that surrounded a rolled-up piece of canvas.

This lay across one of his outside coun-

ters, and he wished to unroll it, preparatory to fastening it to two poles at the curb, to shield his barrels and boxes of vegetables there from the rays of the sun.

He jerked the unwieldy roll to the sidewalk, but the moment he gave the ropes an inch of slack, they abruptly took a yard.

"Dunder und blitzen!" yelled the man.

"Whew!" whistled the amused yet startled Brock.

The storekeeper went back like a jumping-jack. The ropes to which he had held whipped him off his feet, as if there was a ton of lead in the unrolling canvas.

He let go and landed flat on the pavement, and sprawling there, dismay and doubt painted vividly on his face, he glared ahead.

Brock dodged aside, for he caught sight of something dark and bulky hurtling from the white surface.

Two "somethings," in fact—one much smaller than the other—two objects, one unmistakably human, judging from its single startled utterance; the other animal for a sharp, frightened yelp accompanied a swift roll.

"A boy!" ejaculated Brock, staring—"a dog!"

A boy rolled off the edge of the canvas, and struck the street with such force that he spun around for several seconds.

Following him was a dog, one of those small but bristlingly intelligent little canines that land on their feet every time.

This the dog did now, ran to its master, and both stood together looking slightly dazed and entirely embarrassed and dubious.

"You comes oud of dot!" shouted the storekeeper, getting up and glowering on the guilty-looking pair.

"I did, for a fact, mister," nodded the arrival from the interior of the bundle—"hard and sudden."

"You vas—you vas in mein canvas just yet, pretty quick?"

"We were, till you woke us up."

"Voke you up? Ha! Voke you—ho! You sleeps in mein canvas all night? Hein! For vhat?"

"Simply, mister," announced the owner of the dog, quite desperately, "because we had no other place to sleep, and be-

cause the police rooted us out everywhere else. Don't get mad," he continued, in a peculiarly winning and conciliatory tone of voice. "We did no harm to your canvas, and your pillow should be a little smoother to-night for thinking you gave us the first safe and quiet night's shelter we've had for a week—my dog and I—two homeless, friendless—tramps'll do, I guess!"

The boy swallowed the last words in a kind of bitter gulp. His eyes got a trifle moist. He bravely dashed his fist across them. Then he turned again, with the jolly abandon of a reckless smile, to the storekeeper who was looking vainly for a rip or tear in the surface of the canvas and grumbling a little to himself.

"You're not mad?"

"Vell, I vas—bumble-headed; dot is, I likes him not. Next time, young fellow, you creeps into my bed, for all I know, or snoozes in my window garden. Sleep in dot canvas rolled up—ha! ha! Say, it vas funny—he sleeps—ha! ha! ho! ho! Dot vas ritch!"

"He's just beginning to see the funny side of it," spoke the boy to Brock, with a quaint grimace, and then Brock in turn caught the humor of the episode, and laughed, too, despite himself.

The storekeeper finally rubbed the tears of jollity from his eyes.

"Go on, now; I haf business," he cried, growing serious again. "Holt on. You go to a lodging-house to-night, mein frient."

"Hardly, without money," came the dry response.

"I gif you money. You see dose barrels? Four. You see dot skids? You put dem in mein basement, I gif you a nickel. Hey! Stop! You preak your back, you smash my barrels. Ach, himmel! he sleeps in de canvas und he valks off mit hundred poudses as if it vos a feather bed. Hein! He was a chiant!"

Brock made no comment, but he was quite as much astounded as the storekeeper.

Until the offer of a nickel was made, he had seen only in the boy with the dog a rather stocky, well-knit fellow, with a face that he accepted on trust as a thoroughly good one.

As, however, the arrival from the canvas, disdaining the proffered skid, quietly backed to one of four barrels at the edge of the walk, and pulling it across his broad shoulders, rose without effort and started down the cellar steps with it, Brock's big eyes bulged.

There were some pretty fair athletes among the crowd which practiced in Nick Carter's gymnasium, but Brock had never seen such a splendid display of muscles and muscular power in one so young.

Without any apparent excessive strain, and without resting for a single moment, the boy transferred one after another of the four barrels from pavement to cellar, the storekeeper exhausting his vocabulary of wonder-expressions as he watched him, and Brock thinking how Nick Carter, ever on the alert for some rare special qualification or development, would be likely to admire and encourage this modern young Samson.

"Good for you—dot vas great!"

The storekeeper drew forth the promised nickel with the hearty enconium, and flipped it at the boy. The latter spoke a quick direction to his dog, let the whirling coin miss his own grasp, and squarely it landed between the teeth of the intelligent little animal.

"Breakfast, Gyp," cheered it's master. "Come on. Thank you, sir. I'll pick out somebody else's canvas to night. So long," casually to Brock.

The boy whistled to his dog. The animal followed him, turning rapid somersaults, yelping joyfully, and holding the nickel in its teeth, telling as well as it could that it fully understood and appreciated the situation.

Brock somehow was fascinated with the duo. He saw the boy half halt as he passed a baker's window, crisply inviting and sweet-smelling with its generous display, and noticed a hungry, almost ravenous expression on his face.

Setting his lips grimly, however, the latter passed on to the next store—a butcher shop. He entered it, expended the nickel, and came out with a brown paper package around which the dog sniffed, leaped and pirouetted as though frantic to get at its contents.

Its master proceeded over to the steps of a vacant house, and seating himself,

opened the package. It contained half a pound of raw meat.

Brock watched him interestedly as he fed it piece by piece to his dumb companion, talking to him meanwhile as if he was a human friend.

More than once it seemed to Brock as if the boy could scarcely refrain from eating a piece of the meat himself. However, he fed the last morsel to the dog. Then he turned his face aside, and Brock saw that his eyes were full of tears.

"The glorious hero!" choked up Brock, impetuously, reading the picture before him clear through the paint. "Why, he's starved, himself! I can see it, and he thinks of the dog first!—say, look here, look up."

He made an impulsive run to the boy's side, and slapped a hand trembling with honest emotion on his brawny shoulder.

The young giant struggled to smile through his tears.

"Oh," he stammered, "you're the boy who saw the canvas affair. Watching Gyp? Cute, isn't he? Awfully funny."

"No, don't try to put me off that way," spoke Brock, in a quiver. "You brave fellow! It isn't funny; it's—it's tragic! You're hungry!"

"Nothing new if I am," grimaced the other, with a shrug of the shoulders.

"It is to me. Too bad. Strong as you are! Smart as you are! In this big city!"

"Muscle don't count here, it seems," returned the boy, with a slight sigh. "I guess brains do, eh? Can't have much then, for I've tramped for two days and earned only fifteen cents. Honest, I believe I've been to every door in this street for a mile back."

"Stranger here?" queried Brock.

"Yes and no; been here before, but went off as the young Samson with a cheap show. Got stranded. Then I Tommed it."

"Eh? That's new to me."

"Uncle Tom's Cabin."

"Oh."

"Gyp and I"—he put the dog first always, as if he loved the thin little animal better than himself. "Not much of a howling bloodhound, but he chased Eliza while I made lightning changes between Marks, the lawyer, Topsy and George Harris. Then I canal-boated it for a spell,

drifted back here, and—not a friend, not a sou."

The boy let his head drop in a terribly tired and discouraged way.

Brock's hand went into his pocket and came out, and he let a silver dollar drop where the tears had been.

"Eh? no! no! I say——" began the strange boy, flushing quickly.

"I say yes! See here, you go and get a good meal, you fill up. Then—you say you have been at nearly every door on this street?"

"I have, looking for work, offering to carry coal, clean windows, anything."

"And no success?"

"Not even what I longed for most—a friendly, encouraging word."

"Stand up."

Brock put his arm almost caressingly about the shoulders of the boy he felt so pitiful for, as he pointed his finger and directed his glance.

"You see that house—fourth from the red brick one?" he asked.

"Yes," nodded the boy.

"Have you been to that door?"

"Let me see. No, I guess not. I think I missed that one."

"When you've had your breakfast, go there."

"Why?"

"It's the door of a man who never turned even a tramp adrift without a blessing, nor his heart against the friendless."

"Thank you. I need a friend bad enough."

"He'll be that."

"Shall I ask for some one?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Nick Carter."

Brock turned with the words, for he was due at his appointment now.

The boy with the dog stared after him with a little start.

"The great detective!" he murmured, reflectively. "Yes, I'll do what he says, for I've heard of Nick Carter before."

CHAPTER II.

SOLVED AT THE START.

Nick Carter was seated at a table examining some bank checks with a magnifying glass, as Brock entered his private room.

He brushed them aside, and greeted his young protegee in the glad, welcoming way that won him so many friends.

"Just in time, Brock," he announced, with a glance at his watch.

"For 'the case,' Mr. Carter?"

"For 'the case,'" nodded Nick, assentingly.

"What is it?"

"Mystery."

"Deep?"

"No, shallow as to magnitude, but rather muddy as to motives. Never mind that now, though. I want you to take up the affair where I do—direct from the lips of the parties most interested."

"Where are they?" inquired Brock, glancing quickly about the apartment.

"They will be here within five minutes. Meantime, tell me how you have progressed with Armand. Got so you can read the wrinkles on a mummy's face and guess what kind of detectives they had in Egypt two thousand years ago?"

"Hardly," smiled Brock, "but I fancy I can tell whether a man is sincere or not by the wiggling of his left thumb, and I have learned that the human face is two maps."

"Indeed?"

"Yes—look for character in the right half, Armand says, for the petty weaknesses in the left half of the face."

"That's interesting. Ah! Here are our visitors," as the door bell rang. "Just one explanatory word, Brock."

"Yes, sir."

"The people coming here are Amos Sherman, a retired merchant, and his wife—the case is one of robbery. They have lost some four thousand dollars in a single week. Try your new face science on the old man, while I glean a few more salient facts in the case from the woman's talk."

The persons described were ushered into the room at that moment, and after an informal introduction to Brock, whom Nick designated as an "associate secretary," they seated themselves.

Brock knew nothing of the merits of the case as yet, but he studied man and wife narrowly. The former was a thin, nervous person, whose eyes were never still, who jumped at every sound, and seemed on the perpetual edge of some mysterious anxiety.

The woman looked worried—that was all—and as she told how a friend of the detective had sent her to Nick, she looked imploringly at the latter as if she considered him the only person on the earth who could help them out of their troubles.

Briefly she narrated these same: A few days previously certain mysterious occurrences had transpired at their home. These she described tersely.

"On Monday a week ago," she announced, "my diamond earrings, which I had left on the dressing-case, disappeared."

"Window open?" queried Nick.

"Yes, sir."

"Proceed."

"Tuesday morning when I got up, all the silver plate in the stout oak chest under the sideboard had been taken."

"Door broken in?"

"Lock picked," my husband says.

"Wednesday my pocketbook was missing. Thursday my husband's watch chain and shirt studs were taken."

"What is the need of details! Bulk the affair. We have been robbed of so much, and that is an end of it," here put the husband querulously.

"Five days later my husband's little safe in the library was opened, and twenty-five hundred dollars in bank bills abstracted."

Nick's brow contracted dubiously.

"Are you in the habit of keeping so much money in the house regularly?" he ventured.

"No, my husband drew it from the bank."

"Because so many banks are failing, because—in short, I was nervous, timid," put in Mr. Sherman, hurriedly.

"Altogether, we have lost four thousand dollars in value within ten days," resumed Mrs. Sherman. "My husband refused to inform the police. It was with difficulty that I persuaded him to come here with me."

"What's the use?" came another of these sharp interruptions. "The money is gone. That is an end to it."

Brock stole a glance at his patron's face, but it was impenetrable. In his tell-nothing tones Nick proceeded to gather details of the location of the Sherman house, of its visitors, hours of alleged burglarizing, and the like.

"I wish you would at least prevent any further visits of the burglars," spoke Mrs. Sherman. "They are wearing out my husband. For two nights he has insisted on staying on the watch, all alone in the little garden summer house all night, and his sleeplessness is telling terribly on his nerves."

"My dear madam," announced Nick, after taking a few notes on his shirt cuff, "you shall be protected and the stolen plunder traced down. I have all the facts. Leave the case to me. You will hear from me before the week is out."

"We want no notoriety, no—no scandal," piped the old man as he arose. "You understand?"

"Oh, yes, I understand," nodded Nick, touching a bell, as they passed out into the hall.

"And that's the case?" remarked Brock, in a tone of evident disappointment, as the street door closed with a slam.

"That's the case," assented Nick, quietly.

"A common burglary—thefts by servants."

"They have no servants."

"Well, anyway, the preying of some bold thief on two timid old people, stunned and helpless by their first contact with anything of the sort."

"Guess again, Brock," said the detective, with that certain quiet smile of his that always spurred up Brock, for he knew it meant that there was something under the surface.

"Well," plunged Brock, boldly, "I guess I see what you are driving at. The old man is hiding something."

"You've struck it, that's the cue. Go ahead."

"We shall find that he suspects the criminal—oh, it's dead easy! He's worried to death, and would rather that the thing be not investigated at all."

"Good!"

"I'm on the right track?"

"So far."

Brock's eyes brightened.

"He has a nephew, a cousin, some relative. He's afraid that the investigation will involve him. Common case."

"No!"

So emphatic and disappointing was Nick's quick dissenting rejoinder, that Brock knew he had stumbled into a quagmire. "I am a little surprised at you, Brock," said the detective, "that you did not instantly strike the right solution. Hold on, though—what am I saying? Hardly fair to pit my years of experience against your few months, eh? Let me read you a couple of analogous cases, and then—what have we here?"

Nick drew aside the draperies covering the entrance to the little reception-room, and stood looking with evident disfavor at something there.

"I—you will excuse me, sir," began a voice that made Brock hasten to the detective's side.

"Oh," he said, instantly recognizing the intruder, "this is a boy I directed here just before I arrived."

The young giant of the canvas stood hat in hand, his dog behind him, looking very much embarrassed as Brock told his story.

To Brock's surprise, Nick's features did not relax. Instead, he asked the intruder, quite sternly:

"How long have you been in this room?"

"Since I was directed to it, some fifteen minutes ago, I should think," came the prompt answer. "The man who came to the door told me you was engaged, but that I could wait in the library."

"And you stumbled into the wrong room here?"

"I made a mistake, I see, sir, and I also see what you are getting at," responded the boy, bluntly. "You think I have been playing the eavesdropper. If I heard what you was talking about, and saw the people talking, I could scarcely help it."

"I hardly like it, though."

"I certainly shall forget what I heard, if you think my remembering it could work you any harm."

"No, no—I am too quick," spoke Nick, his usual ingenuous self again. "You only listened to an every-day story. What I do not like is my servant allowing the error. There are times when the wrong kind of a stranger might be too near. You strike me as the right kind, my boy. What is your name?"

"I try to be—Donald Boyd."

"Come in. Sit down. Now then, what can we do for you?"

Brock liked to see Nick the detective in his well-fitting role of Nick the philanthropist, and he fancied he had never seen him act the same more genially than on the present occasion.

He discerned in a flash that Nick was struck with the boy, and he shared the sentiment as bit by bit the detective drew out the more graphic points in the career of a knockabout who, with half a chance, would have made a bright, original record.

Nick's eye glowed as Donald relate several little anecdotes unconsciously showing his deep devotion to his dumb friend, as he gave an exhibition of his rare strength by lifting Brock in one hand and holding him above his head.

What seemed to strike Nick most forcibly, however, was the infinite accuracy as to detail with which Don described everything.

"I am going to enroll you," he said, after half an hour's conversation.

"What does he mean?" questioned Don of Brock, rather puzzled.

Brock told of Nick's famous detective school—of the good police material he was trying to start out in life.

"Say!" voiced Don, exuberantly, "just give Gyp a home, just tell me I am sure of a quiet crust and a bunk for a month, and——"

"You'd do wonders?" smiled Nick.

"I'd try to, mighty hard—oh, sir! excuse me. Maybe I am sort of presumptuous to venture my opinion on things——"

"Not at all," encouraged Nick.

"I've seen a good many people," went on Don, "and I caught a glimpse of the face of the old man you was talking to in this room."

"Go straight ahead," directed Nick. "If you have any views on that case——"

"I have. I got thinking, and a conclusion came into my mind. Maybe it's wrong, but it was forcible the minute he spoke."

"You mean as to who stole the four thousand dollars?" asked Brock.

"Yes."

"Who is the thief?"

"The old man, Mr. Sherman, has been robbing himself," was Don's remarkable reply.

Brock started, then conviction flooded his own face, and then he looked quickly, eagerly at the detective.

"Right!" said Nick Carter simply.

CHAPTER III.

STUFFED!

"Have they gone?"

"Yes."

It was the evening of the same day upon which the Sherman case had been reported to Nick Carter and these sentences quickly spoken announced the presence of the great detective's assistants upon the scene of the mysterious four thousand-dollar robbery.

When the young athlete Donald Boyd had expressed a theory unmistakably in line with what Nick himself had already adopted his enrollment as a member of the Carter household was followed by an appointment to immediate outside duties.

Brock was not one bit jealous of the success of an unprofessional outsider in guessing what he had missed. He liked Don from the start and he was glad to see the good impression he made on Nick.

We admire any peculiar attribute of excellence and Brock was greatly taken with Don's phenomenal strength and all-around brightness.

"What do you think of him, Mr. Carter?" he had asked when the detective had sent his new protege to search the general wardrobe for more becoming wearing apparel.

"I think he has had just enough hard knocks to make him appreciate encouragement and success."

"Meaning, in the detective line?"

"He certainly has rare powers of observation, and is quick in his conclusions. What do you think of him yourself, Brock?"

"I think," responded Brock, promptly, "we would mutually consider ourselves a strong team if luck put us together on some good case."

"The Sherman case, for instance?"

"Yes."

"You are going to have your wish. I want you two to start out to-night and investigate that affair."

"Three, you mean."

"How so?"

"The dog. I doubt if Don thinks he could do anything without Gyp."

"That's all right," observed Nick.

"Detective instinct is very often animal instinct developed to a high degree. I've known our four-footed friends to cut a very clever figure in several celebrated cases. Now then, Brock, we want to run down this Sherman riddle."

"Yes, sir."

"Keeping one point strongly in view—I believe that you will very soon learn that old Amos Sherman has been robbing himself."

"We want to know why."

"And where the money has gone to, and you have the final nugget of the whole matter."

Three more ardent devotees of an exciting profession never took up a trail than those grouped behind the rear stone wall of the Sherman house just after dark that evening.

About eight o'clock, Don, maintaining a wonderful poise on a jutting piece of mortar, announced that Mr. and Mrs. Sherman had just started out for a walk, or to do some marketing.

"Over the wall," he ordered, taking the initiative.

The house was dark, and they knew from observation untenanted and unguarded.

Brock made no demur as Don assumed the leadership. He attributed to Don's precipitancy the ardor of the amateur, the first thrill of which he had experienced in former cases, and rather prided himself on his indulgence. Don, however, he found to be a brisk worker, if nothing else. His new helper made his head swim with one or two clever manoeuvres.

Don reached the sill of three windows in a spring that revealed his circus training.

"No go," he announced—"all locked down."

"Can't we force them?"

"Don't want to leave any trails. The rear door it is, I guess. Hold the knob."

It was a door provided with hinge-locking pins that came on the outside. Brock had never thought of that universal weak point in door protection before. Out came the two knob-headed pieces of steel, slanting slipped the door. Don put a block under its bottom, glided through the aperture, and told Brock to follow.

"Got a lantern? Light it. Give it to me. Now then, we want to work quick. Those people may return at any minute." Up stairs, down again, into every room, Gyp silently pattering after them, the searchers went.

Don flashed the light at the little safe, the dressing-case, the front door lock, the window catches.

"Clumsy enough," Brock heard him mutter. "Bound to be a give-a-way, and they were outside again almost before he realized it."

"Well?" he propounded, as they replaced the rear door and got over the back wall again.

"The old man is the thief, just as we decided," declared Don.

"As you did, you mean."

"Oh, you would have reached the same conclusion a little later, even if Mr. Carter had not suggested it," insisted Don modestly. "A blind man could see through the burglaries, and window-climbing and safe-blowing that's reported as going on in that house recently. You noticed the front door?"

"Lock manipulated from the inside?"

"Exactly, and window catches the same. Notice the new ladder? Sherman bought it purposely for his imitation house-breaking. As to the safe, that's fairly laughable."

"How so?"

"Combination scratched on top in plain figures. Oh, Sherman's a novice. No wonder he didn't want 'notoriety,' 'a scandal.' First stage in the Sherman case ends at an unmistakable conclusion: Amos Sherman has been robbing himself, as we inferred."

"And the next step?"

"To find out what he's up to. My im-

pression is he is gambling, or something of that sort. I noticed a bottle labeled 'ammonia' in a cupboard. Smelled it, and found it to be chloroform."

"That looks as if he had the material handy to put his wife to sleep if he wanted to slip out of the house after bedtime."

"You've got it. Now then, we'll take a little stroll, and about ten o'clock return and get back into the garden and watch out to see if Sherman leaves the house."

"Good."

The boys wandered about watching the sights for another hour, and then they returned to the vicinity of the Sherman house.

It was dark as before, except that the faint gleams of a lamp turned way down in one of the bedrooms told that some one had returned and retired for the night during their absence.

They had just got over the wall and were crossing a patch of pretty shrubbery girdling a path leading to the front, Don first, Brock at his side, Gyp coming noiselessly after them, when Brock gave his companion's arm a quick pressure that halted him summarily.

"What is it?" whispered Don.

"Up at the window, white-robed form. It's Mrs. Sherman."

"Don't move."

There was a small balcony at the window of an upper story, and there, sure enough, robed for her couch, was the lady who had visited Nick Carter's home that day.

She peered across the little garden fixedly, even shading her eyes, waved her hand and sighed plaintively.

"Good night, dear, good night!"

"What's this, now?" projected Don, as she disappeared—"some sleep-walking mystery?"

"I—no, say! Stop, stop!" urged Brock, breathlessly. "It's just occurred to me."

"What?"

"The summer house! Don't you remember her telling us to-day that her husband sat up in the little garden summer house all night on the watch?"

"That's so. Where is it?"

"Look, beyond that rose bed. Be cau-

tious. Mr. Sherman is certainly there now."

"You wait here, Brock," ordered Don, in a low tone, and crept off through some bushes to get nearer to the summer house in question without approaching its front.

That Brock watched. His eyes growing more accustomed to the darkness, he began to discern outlines; the floor, a table in its centre, a chair, and seated on it—

"He's there!" affirmed Brock. "Yes, that's his funny-shaped flat hat. He's leaning on one arm. I can even see his handkerchief. Sure enough, he's on guard. Now maybe he is, perhaps, we're way off on this case. If so, he's got all kinds of firearms, probably, and Don don't want to startle him. Why! what's Don up to, anyway?"

Brock grew greatly excited. He tiptoed, running quite a risk of being seen, and goggled with wonderment and then stupefaction.

He could make out Don now. The latter stood crowded up against the vine-covered lattice-work just near the doorway arch.

He seemed to be pushing a stick through the interstices of the framework.

"He's poking up the old man to see if he's asleep. What good is that? It's trifling, it's dangerous," murmured Brock. "Is he gone clear, stark crazy?"

Don suddenly came boldly to the open front of the bower, and glancing inside uttered a low whistle apparently expressive of wonder.

Then he stepped inside. Brock saw him lift his hand and tilt the hat of the figure at the table.

Biff!—he could scarcely believe his senses. Don gave the aged form a sharp knock.

Over the figure tipped, down to the floor it slipped. Don delivered a rollicking kick, and then even at the distance he was Brock could catch the echo of a choking chuckle.

"Why! this is shocking! Don, aren't you ashamed of yourself!" burst forth Brock, unrestrainedly, running up to the spot, "assaulting a defenseless old—"

"Dummy," supplemented Don, laconically. "It's simply a figurehead—stuffed."

CHAPTER IV.

THE GOLD BRICK.

"A dummy!" repeated Brock, blankly.

"Just."

"Stuffed?"

"See for yourself."

"Well!"

Don was chuckling. The situation appealed to his risibilities, but Brock looked dreadfully solemn and mystified. Nothing connected with a four thousand-dollar robbery case could have anything funny about it for him.

"I begin to see," he murmured. "Sherman has been deceiving his wife all the way through."

"That is certain."

"He's off on some dark and mysterious business, while she bids good-night to a mere make-up."

"Even to his snowy handkerchief. See it stick out of the breast pocket, and hum! chloroform? no, some chemical, strong, spilled out of a bottle he carried in his other coat pocket," commented Don, drawing out the handkerchief and snuffing at it.

"Well, he's laid us off for one night, that's sure," observed Brock.

"Yes, whatever mission he's gone on, we probably won't be able to trace him up to-night."

"We'll be earlier and more watchful to-morrow."

"You call me down rightly, Brock," said Don. "I ought to have known better than to have left the house out of sight for a single minute. What's Gyp up to?"

The dog had probably heard his master sniff the handkerchief, and he was following the example—all around the table, under the chair, and Don, observing him, noticed something else as well.

"Why, here's a broken bottle," he spoke, "spilled. Has been trickling from the table. I see. Sherman wiped it off. That's how it comes on the handkerchief."

"Smells like collodion," suggested Brock.

Don stooping over and separated a label with several pieces of broken glass attached to it.

"Nitric acid," he read. "Isn't that what they use for testing gold?"

"Yes."

"Then Sherman broke a bottle of it here to-night in setting his dummy. S't! quit that! You'll arouse the house."

Don spoke warningly to the dog. It had set up a low yelp.

He quieted it, and they all proceeded softly down the gravel walk to the street.

"I believe that dog thinks," spoke Don, observing Gyp's continued restlessness.

"Maybe he does."

"He's up to an old trick."

"What?"

"He thinks I've lost something, from my actions, and he wants to take a scent. Come on, let us think this thing over."

They passed down the sidewalk, conversing, crossed the street, they hardly knew why, proceeded a square, then another, and suddenly Brock, arousing from a fit of abstraction, said:

"Bless me if I don't think we've been mechanically following that dog. He's stopped, I declare, at the door of that tobacco shop. Why, there he is!"

"Who?" demanded Don.

"Mr. Sherman. Is this accident?"

"I hardly know," replied Don, thoughtfully gazing after Gyp, who had risked ahead now; "but pshaw! Has Sherman gone to all this trouble and mystery simply to get a chance to smoke with his cronies?"

The boys passed the windows of the cigar store several times to make sure they were right.

There could be no doubt but that the man seated near its rear was Sherman. They could see him plainly.

He did not appear to be enjoying his cigar very ardently, however, for he puffed at it in an abstracted manner, nor did he join in the conversation of the other inmates of the place.

Brock noticed that some restless, excited expression of face that Sherman had manifested at Nick Carter's, betokening an unnatural mental strain of some kind.

"Well," he said to Don, as they completed a fifth trip by the tobacconist's, "we don't seem to be able to make much of this."

"Why not? We've found him."

"That is true, but it will probably only

lead to our following him back home when he has completed his cigar."

"Oh, no!" declared Don, confidently.

"Think not?"

"I know not."

"You suppose——"

"I know human nature well enough to be certain that this man would not go to all this trouble, plant a dummy and all that, just for a smoke he could take without it."

"I guess you're right. Then it's a close watch, or he may slip us again. You think he's waiting for somebody?"

"Somebody or something."

They crossed the street. There was a closed up banana stand in the shelter of a deep shadow in exact line with the cigar store window, and here the boys seated themselves.

"I say!"

"Well?"

Brock and Don got up instantly with simultaneous ejaculations.

Preparing to watch at their leisure, they found nothing to watch. Sherman was no longer in the tobacco store.

"He didn't come out——" began Don.

"I'll swear to that."

"There must be some other door."

"A rear one behind the high case. Of course, that's it," declared Brock, excitedly. "Hurry up. How to get behind, though!"

"That's easy. Through the next building," suggested Don, and started on a run across the street.

When they had stolen their way through a front hallway and bribed their way through a tenement, they came out into a narrow yard with a large livery stable backing upon it, fronting on the next street.

"There's where he went," guessed Brock.

"Into the livery stable? That seems all right. Hires a conveyance here, maybe, and—some one is coming this way. In here, for a minute!"

The rear doors of the stables were open, and the boys had stepped in. Lamps here and there illumined the long building clear to the front. They now drew back into a stall, for some one was coming toward them—two men, one a driver, for he

wore a banded coachman's hat and carried a whip.

"Missed an extra fiver to-night, eh?" spoke his companion, in appearance the night hostler.

"Just. Come in from a depot load with not so much as a smoke at the end of it, to see Tom Lewis popping out with my regular."

"Who is the old cove, anyway?"

"A mystery, the way he acts. Four nights a week now he's gone to the same place, stays till after midnight, comes back, tips me more than double fare and leaves me at the corner."

"Where do you drive him to?"

The coachman put his finger to the side of his nose and winked wisely.

"That's what I'm paid not to tell," he laughed, with slyness—"oh, no! I'll not kill the goose that lays the golden egg by peaching, not I."

The two men passed on. The boys lingered dubiously for a few moments, and then strolling through the stable came out on the street without any one challenging them.

"Well, what next?" asked Brock

Don was thinking hard. He seemed to be putting all the pieces of a difficult chess problem into place.

"I'll tell you, Brock," he said, "I'm not the fellow to lie fallow when there's anything in sight, but honestly, I believe we shall gain more by waiting for Sherman to come home than to wear ourselves out hunting all over the city for him with no definite point to start from."

"There's the coachman here."

"What are you going to do? Take him by the throat and make him tell—bribe him and have him put Sherman on his guard? No, the more haste the less speed. You wait at the stable here for the carriage to return; I'll watch the house for Sherman himself. Come there if you learn anything."

"That looks all right."

The boys separated, Don going off in the direction of the Sherman home.

Brock hung around the vicinity of the livery stable for three hours. He was walking briskly to keep from getting sleepy about one o'clock, when the sharp rattling of carriage wheels halted him.

Up came a cab, passed him, stopped at

the next corner. A form alighted. It was that of the man Brock was watching for—Amos Sherman.

Brock could not keep his eyes off him. When they reached the Sherman house the old man turned into the garden and went straight to the summer house.

Brock thought it best to stay outside. Don must certainly be on the watch. He lingered behind a tree box for some ten minutes. A whistle at the next corner made him turn in that direction.

Don was beckoning to him, having, in some mysterious way, got clear around the square. Brock hastened to join him.

Don looked quite excited. He held something in his hand, wrapped in a handkerchief.

"Don, you saw Sherman?" projected Brock.

"He came right into the garden."

"To the summer house?"

"Yes. Whatever the secret of these nightly excursions of his, they have reached some kind of a climax to-night."

"How?"

"He was terribly agitated, muttering to himself and trembling all over. 'At last!' I heard him murmur. 'I saw it with my own eyes! I've got it. The first fruits. It's here!' Then he drew something from his pocket, wrapped it in his handkerchief, looked at it, fondling it, mumbled over it, stuffed it way back in the drawer of the stand and went into the house."

"And you got it?"

"I got it, yes. Wasn't I right?"

"If it's a clew."

"It must be."

"What is it?"

Don pushed the folds of the handkerchief aside, at the same time saying:

"A gold brick."

CHAPTER V.

CHASED DOWN.

"A 'gold brick!' " repeated Brock, and his face fell.

A whole troop of rapid suggestions ran instantly through his mind. A 'gold' brick had but one association in metropolitan criminal lore—swindling of the most patent type.

"Well, the cat's out of the bag finally," he remarked, with a disdainful

shrug of the shoulders—"threadbare flim-flam, regular country jay swindle. Some sharp conspirators have got old Amos Sherman to gather up his good coin, and have sold him the diggings of 'an unfortunate miner' at a discount."

"Not at all," chopped in Don, very sharply and definite.

"No?"

"Not to my way of thinking. I can't figure out how, but neither can I believe that Sherman has got here a simple bare-faced swindle. The worn-out brass brick isn't being played. There's something deeper in the game than that."

"Why is there?"

"I judge from the manner and words of Sherman. He looked like an enthusiast on the edge of a delirious discovery; I think he called this 'a specimen,' 'first fruits,' 'he'd seen it done!' What! A negotiation? An investment? No, some act, not hocus-pocus. Some—but we are wasting time here. We want to run down this gold brick, find out where it comes from, what it represents. Brock, I'll wager considerable, which I haven't got, that back of all this is no innocent, lamb-like slipping of a credulous old man into some ordinary swindle, but a big experiment, a new idea, some tremendous departure out of the common."

"Yes, but what?"

"We'll delve and see. Here, can you get the brick in your pocket? We'll show it to Mr. Carter, and he may want it put back so as to see what Sherman will do with it to-morrow."

"Going to wait till to-morrow?"

"Not for the other end of the case. That will stand immediate investigation. What did the stableman call the driver who got the extra fiver fare to-night?"

"Tom Lewis."

"Tom Lewis we must interview."

"Now?"

"At once. You saw him?"

"As he drove Sherman to the corner yonder and dropped him, yes."

"Know him again?"

"I think I should."

Don briskly led the way in the direction of the livery stable.

"Keep with me and look dreadfully anxious and important," he directed as they neared it, and he proceeded straight

up the slanting entrance and to the door of the dimly-lighted office, where three attaches of the place were smoking and conversing.

"Is there a man named Lewis here—Tom Lewis?" inquired Don.

"That's me, guv'nor," assented one of the trio, arising and coming forward.

"He's the man who drove Sherman," whispered Brock.

"I'd like a minute's private conversation with you," spoke Don, leading the way out of earshot of the others. "We just came from your night fare."

"Oh, did you?" slowly commented Lewis, suspiciously, looking the speaker over.

"We did, and—say, will you go to the cab you drove and search all about for a little square package?"

The driver looked puzzled. Don had ventured to guess that he might have noticed the parcel Sherman carried. Lewis went away, and came back shaking his head.

"Nothing in the cab," he reported.

"What are we going to do, then?" demanded Don of Brock with great assumed solicitude.

Brock shook his head solemnly.

"I don't see, except to search."

"At the last place he was. Lewis," uttered Don, sharply, "did your fare stop on the way?"

"From the hotel here—not a place," blurted out the coachman, never guessing the trap he was falling into. "He must have lost the package after getting out on the street and going home. He had a package when he came down from the hotel, I saw it."

"Maybe it dropped out of the cab," suggested Don.

"Couldn't."

"See here," persisted Don, briskly, "it might. 'Anyway, that's our business, to find it. It's not your fault. Nobody blames you. How did you come? Here,'" and Don got down on his knee and traced his finger on the dusty floor like a pencil. "Here's the stable——"

"Exactly, zigzag to Second avenue, now then south you go, and right to the Virden Hotel."

Brock's eyes gave a quick snap, evoked by admiration of the clever "razzle-daz-

zle" which his shrewd associate had employed to find out from the coachman all he wished to know.

"Don," he cried, slapping him delightedly on the shoulder as they left the stable, "you're a trump!"

"Well, we've learned where Sherman goes nights, it seems."

"Yes, to the Virden Hotel, but the way you pulled the wool over the coachmans' eyes!"

"That was a very simple hocus-pocus. Get a man's mind fixed on some problem or idea where he has to momentarily think and take his wits off guard, and you've got him every time. In watching my finger, that fellow forgot his caution. We're headed straight now."

It was a plain, simple proposition—to get to the Virden Hotel, and to find out who it was that Amos Sherman was in the habit of visiting there.

The hour was quite late when the two diligent trailers reached the hostelry in question, but there was still considerable activity about the place.

A transfer wagon had just driven up and was depositing the luggage of some late arrivals. The porter, looking cross and sleepy, began carrying in the same.

He had just tackled a big trunk as the boys strolled by, and they would not have particularly noticed him had they not heard a slight crash and a sharp cry.

Both turned, but Don did not stop the motion of his supple form till it had described a quick spring. The porter, it seemed, had slipped or stumbled, had fallen directly across a narrow areaway stairs, and on top of him, crushing him back, bending his spine to cracking tension the heavy trunk was fighting against his ebbing powers of resistance.

"Lift it! hold it!" he screamed.

"Wait!"

Don's practiced eye saw that a minute's delay would wear the man out. He was practically in the position Don himself had often been in his circus experience, when, face up, supported by hands and feet, he sustained a heavy anvil—to give way meant to be crushed.

To pull the trunk would be to dent its sharp corner right into the unfortunate porter's vitals, to try to lift it with no chance for a fair clutch was impossible.

"Wait!" repeated Don, sharply.

How he did it—dive, dodge or slide—Brock could not entirely decide, for he did it so quickly, but the next thing he knew Don was down beside the sinking victim on the steps, his own broad back braced under the trunk.

It lifted inch by inch, poised so delicately, that a tip would send it crashing.

"Brock!" called a muffled voice to the palpitating onlooker. "Catch the handle, pull gently. There you are!"

The skilled athlete tilted slowly forward, the trunk slid to the smooth sidewalk. Supporting the exhausted porter, Don followed it.

"S-say!" spluttered the former, shaking from head to foot, "that was a narrow shave."

"S-s-slightly," smiled Don. "Brace up, old man, you're all right. Here, none of that! Your nerves won't be steady enough for a job like that till you've had a good night's sleep. Where does the trunk go?"

Don shouldered the trunk. He followed the weak and wobbling porter to the baggage room of the hotel, and threw it down as lightly as he had carried it.

He gave a knowing wink at Brock as he did so, and the latter enthused mentally more than ever over his clever companion, as he traced in his latest exploit not one iota of braggart vanity, but action looking solely to putting them closer to the object of their quest.

The porter sank to a chair and panted and winced, felt all over himself to be sure all his bones were in place, and then getting slightly over his scare, turned his attention to Don.

He bubbled over with gratitude. This gave way to wonder, and he seemed to experience the keenest delight in feeling his rescuer's iron-muscle arm, in slapping his knotted back and eyeing off his sturdiness generally.

"There's not many built like you," he commented. "Good thing for me one of the few was around when I tumbled, or I'd have carried no more trunks."

"Oh, we strong men ought to help each other. It's professional, you know," joked Don, and the man was flattered.

"Wish I could return your royally

grand act," he expressed himself, ardently.

"Why, maybe you can," answered Don, with a significant look at Brock.

"That so? Say, give me the chance."

"All right. I'll call you the squarest kind of a creditor if you'll answer me a few questions and forget to tell anybody I ever asked them."

"Won't I!"

"Very well, I'm trying to find out something."

"About——"

"A man who has been driven to this hotel at night several times lately."

"Oh, say!" interrupted the porter, quickly. "You don't mean an old man?"

"I do."

"Tom Lewis drove him to-night."

"You've got it."

"Oh, I can tell you all about him."

"Good!" nodded Don, eagerly, and "Good!" echoed the fluttering Brock under his breath.

"What do you want to know?"

"Who does the old man come to see?"

"Is that all?"

"Yes, as a starter."

"Why," answered the porter, acting as if a little surprised at the simplicity of the question, and as if the answer was so easy as to be the most natural thing in the world, "he comes to see Croesus J. Dunbar."

"Who's he?" propounded Don, sharply, struck by the queer name.

"The man from Klondike."

CHAPTER VI.

"THE MAN FROM KLONDIKE."

"The man from Klondike?" murmured Don.

"Yes," nodded the porter.

He had spoken the name as if it was written with big capitals, and much as he would announce "the Duke of Gloucester."

"Who is he, anyway?" demanded Don in a business-like, though curious, tone, used to the high sounding appellatives of the sawdust ring, and therefore less impressed than his companion.

"As I told you, Croesus J. Dunbar. Never heard of Croesus J. Dunbar?"

"Never."

"Well, he's a—a nabob.

"Is he?"

"Genuine, glare and glitter till he dazzles out the night clerk's sparkler, and keeps the bell-boys fighting for a chance to wait on him. Been here two weeks. He's made a trail of gold, I tell you. That's him."

"Let's look."

Brock and Don knocked their heads together in their eagerness to catch a glimpse of the photograph which the porter here produced.

It represented a short, rotund man with one of those faces that suggest noisy bluster and tireless activity.

"Found it in the paper basket in his room, so guess he threw it away," explained the porter. "Want it? Certainly, you can have it. Yes, that's the nabob, that's the sensation of the hour hereabouts."

"And he's from Klondike, eh?" murmured Don, studying the portrait musingly.

"Fresh and direct. Full of it. He's got chunks of gold bigger than eggs. Sifts the yellow dust in fist fulls from his pocket while he talks to you, and describes Alaska till you imagine it's a big mountain of gold."

"Forming a stock company on his wonderful prospects, I suppose?" suggested Brock meaningly.

"Not a bit of it. Says he's got nothing to sell. Information only to give, and this he distributes free."

"Made his pile, and posing as a nabob spending it?" ventured Brock again.

"Well, he claims to have the stuff, but he practically turns his nose up at mining. Says he's got a better thing and an easier thing than freezing your fingers out on the Yukon separating nuggets from icicles."

"I'd like to see him," remarked Don.

"Say, you shall!" declared the porter, readily. "See him? I'll put you right up next to him. You shall talk to him, you shall slip into his room and see his splendid specimens. Anything you like. I'm your friend, and whether you're his or not, is none of my concern."

"Good for you!" answered Don, emphatically. "I'll be here in the morning

to see about it. I've an interest in this man."

"I guess that."

"And the people he's dealing with."

"All the same to me. You saved my life. Tell me what I can do to show I appreciate it."

Brock, Don, dog—in that order the dauntless trio had left Nick Carter's home at dusk.

Brock, Don, dog—in that order they returned to Nick Carter's home at nearly dawn.

Brock looked satisfied. They had done some good work in his estimation, and had found out considerable that was new.

Don was rather thoughtful. He was not as ready as his companion to accept the conclusion that the Sherman case involved only an ordinary case of swindling of the most common type.

Nick had retired, it seemed, for they found nobody in the big sitting-room.

"We'll take a few winks ourselves, Don," said Brock. "We've got the Sherman case reduced down pretty fine, and it will keep till morning without watching, I guess."

"Yes," assented Don, "we've got the main actor where he can be found when needed. I am anxious to know what Mr. Carter thinks about it all, though——"

"He'll tell you, if you'll make your report," broke in a hearty voice, and Nick moved from the draperies of the connecting apartment. "Fell asleep in my chair, and you woke me up. What luck, Brock?"

The latter recited the details of their night's experience. Nick listened closely.

"The gold brick scheme, eh?" he commented. "They've fooled the old man Sherman with delusions of great wealth. Of course this Dunbar will shortly make a break for obscurity. I think we had better place the matter in the hands of the police and have them wind it up. What's that?"

"Oh, that's the brick," explained Don, producing it.

"The same old brick, eh?" smiled Nick. "Strange, how cupidity and dazzle will lead conservative business men to grab at a brick of gilded brass, test with doctored acids, and fancy they've

got something for nothing! Wait a moment, though."

The minute Nick received the brick he began to heft it and scan it with rising briskness of manner.

Now he went over to his desk, took up a queer spiral instrument, gave it a dozen twists in different parts of the brick, applied some liquid from a vial, and came back to his young friends with a decidedly thoughtful face.

"Wrong hypothesis somewhere," he spoke.

"What do you mean, Mr. Carter?" asked Brock.

"I mean that there is something deeper in this affair than the old gilt swindle."

"Why?"

"The brick is gold—solid, genuine gold."

Brock looked a little blank at the detective's announcement, but Don's face brightened visibly.

"Mr. Carter" he said, "that puts a new phase on the matter, doesn't it?"

"Entirely so. With Sherman willing to invest his money and the seller furnishing genuine gold, all the law in Christendom dare not interfere."

"But," pursued Don, eagerly, "we have a right to guess that no man would go to the trouble that Sherman has if it was a clear, straight transaction?"

"Exactly."

"And that the man from Klondike is up to some game?"

"Yes."

"His looks show that he has a vast amount of sinister cunning in reserve," remarked Brock.

"Oh! then you have seen him?" interrogated Nick, quickly.

"No, but we have his picture.

"Let me have a look at it."

"There it is."

"Zounds!"

The veteran detective was not given to sensational expletives, but he projected this one with a force that astonished Brock.

So sharply and steadily did Nick study the photograph, and so vivid was his interest in it, his apparent recognition, that Brock was placed on new nettles of excitement.

"You said 'Zounds!' Mr. Carter?" he insinuated.

"Did I?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well?"

"You don't do that often."

"No, for I am not often startled as that picture has profoundly startled me," confessed Nick, promptly. "Boys, you have just begun your work on the Sherman case."

"And I fancied it finished," deprecatingly muttered Brock. "This picture opens——"

"A new vista, a second line of speculations, certainties. They call him, you say?"

"Croesus J. Dunbar," answered Brock, promptly.

"The man from Klondike," supplemented Don.

"He is neither."

The boys hustled on the sharp edge of curiosity.

"His right name is Barney Dwyer.

"His correct appellation would be 'The man from Prison.'

"He is known to the authorities as Velvet Foot, the most dangerous swindler and all-around thief that ever set New York by the ears.

"He was released from the Dartmouth Prison, in England, last January, after serving a fifteen years' sentence.

"The papers were full of his death at sea ten days later, and he was crossed off 'active shadow' as a troublesome customer finally out of the way.

"He is the man who put up the great Charleston bank sneak, getting away with sixty thousand dollars in bonds and securities.

"He is also the originator of the guesspadlock scheme, so successfully worked on innocent farmers.

"Twice he has flooded France with fraudulent mining projects, reaping a rich harvest from the gullible."

"My friends, I never forget a face. Here, only one feature has guided me—the eyes—but this is the man I describe beyond the peradventure of a doubt.

"I would stake my professional reputation upon this, and shrewdly, accidentally, as you choose, but all the same surely, you have located in the heart of

New York city, a man believed by the police of two continents to be fathoms under the sea.

"I can conceive no greater benefit to pilfered humanity, no more famous act within the scope of detective powers, than to land this king of swindlers safely behind prison bars once more, and keep him there."

"Why!" breathed Brock, in a fervent gasp.

Don's face was radiant—only that.

They had done "a big thing!" and there was a prospect of it expanding.

In dramatic sections Nick Carter's words had fallen upon the still air, clear cut and concise as the summing up of a case in court.

"Then——" began the impetuous Brock.

"You will first return this brick to where you found it. We must not alarm any of the covey until the time has arrived for the firing of the final gun."

"I will do that," promised Don.

"In your own way you will think out the best course to pursue in fathoming what lies under the surface. You have the chance of a lifetime before you," declared Nick Carter, positively. "This Sherman case is no cheap gold brick swindle. Behind it is the cleverest scoundrel known to Christendom, behind him is a record that convinces me that when you run his scheme, his motives to burrow, you will have unearthed the greatest swindle of the nineteenth century."

— — —

CHAPTER VII.

GETTING READY.

"What are you doing, Don?"

"Getting ready for the campaign."

"And training Gyp to take a part?"

"Could I do anything right without him in it? You don't know that dog's full capabilities yet, Brock. He'll surprise you one of these days."

"You're surprising us, Don, I declare! Mr. Carter seems to think you're about as near to perfect, so far as shrewdness goes, as they make them."

"If I am really shrewd," returned Don, "it's because I've been ground against the whetstone of hardship. That sets the edges, I tell you."

"It has in your case. What are you doing?"

Don only smiled and kept his attention fixed on Gyp. He had the little animal in a corner of the room, and he was thrusting under its nose, and then grabbing away a small square piece of something.

"Cheese — tantalizing the poor little fellow. I wouldn't have thought it of you. Here Gyp, I'll get you a whole chunk to feast on."

"Never!" dissented Don, forcibly. "Don't interfere, Brock, and as you value our friendship never let him get at that cheese in this house."

"Well!"

"I mean it. I am teaching him to associate this house solely with the peculiar flavor of that cheese. It is a select brand Mr. Carter uses, it seems. Lesson over!" called out Don to the dog, gave him a crisp bone, and arose to his feet carefully securing in oiled paper and stowing away in a far inside pocket the cheese morsel in question.

Brock felt curious enough to want to know what possible results his new friend hoped to achieve from so much care and trouble, but he realized that Don rarely did anything whimsical and purposeless, and half surmised that the bit of cheese and clever Gyp would come into associated evidence somewhere farther down the line.

Don had made a surreptitious break-of-day visit to the Sherman garden, and had replaced the abstracted gold brick just where he had found it.

Nick had set another pupil watching the Sherman house, with instructions to keep a close eye upon the bower, to follow Sherman wherever he went that day, and to report at three o'clock in the afternoon, when he would be relieved on his watch by a comrade assistant who was also under the detective's tutelage.

Brock and Don, Nick left solely to their own devices. He seemed to think it the best plan for the present. The two friends had discussed every phase of the Sherman case that morning, and had formulated a definite plan of procedure.

As the day progressed, however, its first arranged details were considerably modified of necessity.

The sharp work of the night previous had been the first that Brock had engaged in since his convalescence from a bad fall he had received in running down some counterfeiters two months previous.

As the morning wore on he began to feel the effects of his brisk exercise. At noon he was limping, and Nick noticing it, told him that it would not do to overtax himself—to take another night's rest and let Don get the field ready for double action.

"I'll just make a brief skirmish around the Virden Hotel," suggested Don, "get more solid with the porter, and find out the lay of the land generally. The man from Klondike, alias Croesus J. Dunbar, alias Barney Dwyer, alias Velvet Foot, is in some scheme that is working slow, for he's been quite a time at it, and there is no need of rush work. I'll be back some time this evening."

"Suppose you find it best not to?" asked Brock.

"Then I'll send Gyp."

"You'll what!" cried Brock.

"Send my messenger—the dog."

"Oh, come now!"

"Won't I?"

"Oh!" smiled Brock, "I begin to see the real utility of your cheese-training scheme. But to act as a messenger——"

"Look out for Gyp when I'm away, that's all," observed Don, significantly.

The speaker was ready to depart now, and told Brock so. Gyp was wagging his little stump of a tail expectantly, anxious to get into the open air again, and the two friends were exchanging sentiments as to the general plan of progress in the case on hand, when both looked in mutual surprise toward the front door.

A ring and the response to the summons by a servant had brought in a decidedly turbulent caller.

At him the boys looked curiously, for he was a curiosity. He was a young sprig of fashion of the extremest kind. From monocle stuck in his eye to cane stuck in his hand, he was no exaggeration of the stage conception of the swell representation of the tenderloin district.

"My deah fellow!" he cried. "So dreadfully exhausted! I must see Mr. Carter, you know. Where is he? Where will I find the distinguished gentleman?"

The servant showed the new-comer into the detective's consultation room. Fresh as a field of daisies, the queer arrival spurred up Brock and Don to curious interest.

"Isn't he a wonder!" chuckled Don. "Come on, let's see what he's after."

"Oh, my deah Mr. Carter! Are you Mr. Carter, sir? I fawncied you a giant in stature, quite, all covered with handcuffs and pistols. Oh, deah! My nerves are atwociously jarred. Mr. Carter, my deah boy, Nick—may I call you Nick? they all do, ha! ha! quite a joke. I am in a dweadful dilemma."

The great detective sat staring vaguely at this hurricane of dawdling eloquence, of foppish emptiness, as if some one with a grudge against him was paying off the same.

The new-comer was in a frenzied sort of a flutter. In a hysterical way he tore a check book from his pocket.

"Fill it out, my deah Mr. Carter, don't wefuse, pray, don't wefuse! I am in awful straits. The bah, the juwy, the horwid prison cell yawn fow me!"

The feather-brained young man ended with a sort of a shriek. Nick tried to keep his face straight.

"Mister—your name, please?"

"Nevah, Mr. Carter!" cried the visitor, shrilly. "It must be only whispered. May I whisper? Oh, the horwid scandal!"

He mumbled a name. Nick regarded him curiously. It was his first view of one of those nonentity scions of a once great New York family, gone back the evolution scale many degrees toward the alleged ape ancestor.

Then he spoke a second name—that of a society leader of great wealth.

"He is to be my fathah-in-law!" wailed the young man. "Think of it!"

"Are you wanting me to pity you or him?" edged in Nick, bluntly.

"Oh, sir, don't be facetious. I am in terwible twouble."

"Well, if you will compose yourself sufficiently to tell me what your trouble is, maybe I can help you out of it."

"Oh, Mr. Carter, you must, indeed you must! There is no one newwer than Scotland Yard. A fwiend sent me to you—a fwiend I can trust."

"I am not in active service——" began Nick.

"Oh, Mr. Carter, don't say that! I shall de—I shall faint if you do. Listen, sir. My fathah-in-law that is to be went to Fuwope last month. He placed his plate in my safekeeping. Oh, deah! A gold service, solid, Mr. Carter, a silver service, also solid. Priceless, Mr. Carter. Value over twenty thousand dollars. My folks cut off my allowance suddenly—saving for the grand wedding. I got in debt at the club. Honah, Mr. Carter. I—I hypothecated the plate."

"You mean you pawned it?"

The distressed young man uttered another feminine shriek.

"Must I confess?" he wailed. "Yas, I pledged it. A tempowary makeshift, indeed, Mr. Carter, for yesterday I went to that horwid Isaacs with the money to redeem the plate, and——"

"I read it in the papers," interrupted Nick—"his place was burglarized the night previous."

"And the plate was taken. Oh, Mr. Carter, can you not get it for me? What will my fathah-in-law that is to be say?"

"Give me an accurate description of it," ordered the detective, "and I will see what I can do."

"Heah it is, Mr. Carter, all written out for you," answered the young man, tendering a folded slip of paper, "and, oh, Mr. Carter, I must tell you. Lawst night a man joined me on the street. He said he could westore the plate for five thou. Think of it! and I have only two, and then he said put a personal in the papah accepting the offah before to-morrow, or it would be melted up. Think of it! melted up, and with it would melt all my hopes of a wich fathah-in-law."

The weak-brained fellow was fairly blubbering now.

"What kind of a looking man was he?" asked Nick.

"He was, oh, deah! What a shock, Mr. Carter. I shall swoon, I know I shall. That is the man—that is the man."

"Who is the man? What do you mean? Eh?" cried Nick, bolt upright in a minute—"you mean this?"

Upon the table tilted against an ink-

stand stood the picture of the man from Klondike.

"That is him—I could sweah it—his vewy face. Oh, Mr. Carter, you will save me from disgwace?"

"I'll try to."

It was wonderful how Nick's face changed from bored weariness to sudden animation the minute his visitor's vehement declaration associated the picture of the central figure in the Sherman case with his own affairs.

"You heard him?" queried Nick of the equally wondering Brock and Don.

"I heard him," spoke Don, thoughtfully. "Mr. Carter, things are getting muddled."

"Do not become confused because you find another diverging string to Velvet Foot's operations," said Nick. "I told you he was no ordinary schemer."

"I think I had better begin a shadow on him," muttered Don.

"I think you had."

"Gold at the Sherman end of the affair; gold at the end of this new element in the case," reflected Don, as he left the house. "There are likely to be some very pretty developments before I get through with the man from Klondike."

Nick did not seem to be in a mood for conversation after Don had left, and Brock went to his own room, and tried to think that every hour he got of rest was just so much recuperation for a possible joint shadow with Don on the morrow.

He lay down on a couch to read and fell asleep before he knew it.

When he woke up Brock was amazed at his long spell of slumber.

"Why, it's after eight o'clock," he said, coming down into the hall and glancing at the big timepiece there. "Boys all out," he decided, looking into the gymnasium. "Mr. Carter's room is dark, so he must be out too."

Brock was bound for the library, intent on putting in an hour or two on a volume just issued describing some of the results of the Bertillon system of measuring criminals, when he paused and listened.

"What's that noise at the door?" he asked himself. "The wind?"

He half decided it was the rising breeze blowing some piece of stray paper across the porch, but arrived at a new conclusion as the sounds increased, and with a marked regularity.

Scratch—scratch—scratch.

And then—a yelp.

"Hullo," exclaimed Brock, knowingly, and his eyes opened wide.

He hurried to the door and opened it.

There stood Gyp, a piece of white paper tied about his neck.

CHAPTER VIII.

ON THE TRAIL.

"Don said he'd do it, and he's done it!" cried Brock.

He grabbed up Gyp and speedily bore the little animal into the lighted hall of the detective's home.

The appearance of the dog, panting, dusty, and exhausted, the presence of the paper tied to its collar, instantly apprised Brock of the fact that Don had sent a messenger, as he had promised to do.

"Oh, but Don is a rare one!" reflected Brock, admiringly. "And he hasn't sent a message to show off, either. That isn't his way. No, it tells something important, I'll wager. Dear! dear dear!"

With rising inflection, as he repeated the words, Brock arrived at a climax of intense disappointment and dismay.

Eagerly disengaging and unfolding the paper at Gyp's neck, he found what had once been a full sheet note, cut, torn or bitten exactly in two, and the severed fragment was gone.

"I see how it is," ruefully soliloquized Brock, with a quick glance at the dog. "Gyp has come along minding his own business all right, and some loafer cur has pitched on to him—took the tip of one ear and half the letter. Well, let us see what I can make out of the other half."

It proved a tantalizing task.

"I have been employ
Man from Klondike
rare old fellow, the porter
have left the Virden
deep schemers
a clearing house, and
come there and hang around
demonstration to-night."

"Gibberish, Greek, jargon," muttered Brock. "Isn't it too bad, now! Don wants some one to come somewhere. I'm on nettles. If Mr. Carter was only here! Say, I've got to get outside and cool my head, or it will burst open."

Brock was becoming excited. Perhaps a slight spice of emulation stimulated him. Here was a new operative carrying off all the honors, in the thick of the contest alone.

Brock forgot his lameness and his judgment. He acted on a sudden impulse, slapped his cap on his head as if he meant business, made a dive for the door, and was out on the street the next minute.

He had gone half a dozen squares before he made the discovery that Gyp was quietly plodding at his heels.

"Let him come along," decided Brock, after a momentary hesitation. "I say, old fellow, where's your master—where's Don?"

Gyp gave a sharp yelp as if to say he'd like to know and would find out if he was given the chance, and "pointed" down a diverging street.

"That way, eh?" muttered Brock. "To the Virden Hotel? Why not? Even if Don has left, there's the friendly porter. Good for you, Gyp. We'll try that lead as a starter."

Brock found the very man he wanted seated in the door of the baggage entrance to the hotel, and he approached him promptly.

"You remember me, don't you?" he began, and the porter noticing the dog with a start scanned Brock's face next, and his own lightened with recognition.

"You're his friend?"

"Don's, yes."

"Exactly. Why, how comes the dog with you? He took it away with him two hours ago."

"Oh, that's all right. Look here, do you know where he's gone to?"

"Off with the man from Klondike outfit."

"Where?"

The porter shook his head.

"Your friend didn't have a chance to tell me. I only know this: He wanted to get right up against Croesus J. Dunbar, and I put him there."

"How?" projected Brock, curiously.

"Seems Dunbar heard me tell a day or two ago about a nephew I had—a deaf mute—told me he wanted just such a boy."

"Well?"

"I told your friend, Don."

"Yes."

"He posed for the position."

"And got it?"

"Precisely."

"That is, he has been engaged in the service of the man from Klondike?"

"That's it."

"And has gone off with him?"

"You've hit it, and that same old man you're so interested in——"

"Sherman," muttered Brock.

"He's been here. The three went off together."

Brock reflected deeply.

"Do you suppose this Dunbar has left the hotel for good?" he asked.

"He took away two satchels—your friend carried them—and he paid his bill up to date. I notice he's left a bundle in his room, though. Excuse me a minute. There's a call for me. Be back soon."

The tap of a bell from the clerk's desk call the porter away. Brock saw him directed to an ill-favored fellow who handed him a note.

The porter made for the stairs, but circled around to where Brock was on his way, pretending to be looking over some luggage, and said in quite a mysterious tone:

"See that man who just came in?"

"Yes," assented Brock.

"Follow him when he leaves here."

"Why?"

"He comes from Dunbar."

"Oh!"

"With a note for Mr. Dunbar's laundry package."

"Good. Thank you. See you again."

Brock posted himself outside now. In a few minutes out came the man he had been directed to notice, carrying quite a large bundle under one arm.

Brock knew the value of precaution. If this man was a friend or employee of Dunbar, he might have seen the dog companion of Dunbar's new mute employee, so Brock stopped long enough to give the canine a lecture.

"See here, Gyp," he said, "mum's

the word. You keep shady now. Understand?"

He buttoned his coat baggily and slipped the little creature into a snug berth, Gyp closing his eyes and affirming as plainly as dog could affirm, that he wouldn't show the tip of his nose till directed!

"I guess I'm started right," decided Brock, with considerable complacency. "This fellow's an easy one."

The man he was shadowing was stolid to the point of stupidity. He shambled lazily ahead, and paid so little attention to surroundings that Brock kept close to his heels.

When he stopped it was on a quiet thoroughfare built up solid with four-story brick buildings given over to respectable tenements, to business chance offices and storage.

One of these had its store front lighted, and bore the neat modest sign, "Hand Finish Laundry."

Inside behind a counter sat a dapper clerk, and behind him was the conventional box-divided partition for holding bundles.

The man went in and threw his parcel on the counter. The clerk received it, took up what looked like a numbered card, tore it in two, gave one half to the man, attached the other half to the bundle, threw the bundle into one of the compartments, and sat down to make an entry in an open book.

Not a word had passed between the two, not a sign of recognition, and yet the man Brock was shadowing proceeded familiarly over to a corner of the room, and seemed shuffling his feet around, as if posing for something.

Flip-flop went something so quick, so vivid, that Brock gasped. Where the man had stood he was not now.

Brock goggled. Certainly by no door had the man vanished. Either a trap in the floor or a panel in the wall had swallowed him up. Brock was bothered, but for all that his face brightened.

"Good enough!" he commented. "When people have to adopt such mysterious humpty dumpty tactics, there's something crooked under it. This is a crooked place. Now then, to find out why and how."

Brock hung around the street. He joined two boys over on an ash box playing mumblety-peg, he helped another hunt for a lost ball, he made himself generally at home and naturally occupied in a dozen various ways during the next half hour, but he kept his eyes on the "hand finish laundry" all the time.

During that thirty minutes those eyes were opened to a singular fact.

Out of some twenty different "customers" who arrived, every one was a man, every one of a certain slinking, furtive type, and every one seemed to bear a package too heavy to comprise shirt collars and cuffs. In fact, as one of these stumbled at the doorstep, and his parcel fell to the stone, it gave a clatter more resembling a mix-up of cast metal than the crisp brushing together of starched shirt bosoms. Just as the man Brock was shadowing had quietly transacted his business with the clerk, so those following him delivered their bundles and received checks without comment, only none of these latter followed the harlequin example of the first arrival. They pocketed the checks carefully, and stole down the street and out of it as if a mission of extreme secrecy or crime had just been accomplished. The partitioned off case behind the clerk was now pretty full of bundles. Brock saw the latter come to the door. He glanced up and down the street, and then hurried back behind the counter again.

Brock observed him kick a piece of wood projecting from the floor.

"Hello!" ejaculated the gaping observer.

Down through the floor shot the partition—bundles and all. Up it came again—empty.

"Funny laundry!" muttered the aroused and curious Brock. "That was a quick turn. He's lowering the lights. Unlocks a door near the partition. Going into the next room. Locked up? No. Ah, my chance!"

The man had closed the street door, but had not secured it. Apparently he was gone into an adjoining room for a brief moment only, possibly down below to direct the further manipulation of those mysterious bundles. Customers could wait till he returned, it seemed.

At all events, the clerk would be gone for a minute or two, and a minute or two was all Brock felt he needed to find out something he had been burning to know for the last thirty minutes.

Noiselessly he opened and reclosed the door, like a shadow he crossed the floor to the corner where he had seen the man from the hotel disappear.

He felt around with his feet as he had seen the man do, he groped across the surface of the wall.

Click went a catch that his hand swept over. A section of the wall gave in and he went with it.

Two separating panels let him back, whirled clear around on pivots, a circular piece of the flooring whirled with him, the panels shot back, the floor stopped revolving, and Brock, slightly dazed but triumphant, found himself in another room.

"Good as a play—I've got there," he soliloquized. "Pretty dark. Tables? No, chair. I'll sit down, and rest, and think and listen."

Brock softly sank into the chair he had stumbled against. He was sorry for it the next instant.

Whirr-r-r went some secret mechanism in its bottom, set loose by a spring he must have pressed down.

Quick as a flash Brock realized what he had done, and his danger.

He flopped to the floor, ran his hand under the chair, seized a clock work unwinding spiral spring, and let it run its course till it muffled out.

"Whew!" he commented, as his fingers crossed the surface of a good-sized alarm bell—"a house of traps and warnings, eh? I must be cautious. They seem to be prepared for trespassers here. If I hadn't had the wit to check that bell just in time, I'd have had a whole houseful about my heels in less than half a minute."

CHAPTER IX.

THE HOUSE OF SECRETS.

Brock made sure that there was no danger of the bell chair "going off" again, and stood in the darkness and silence debating what he should next do.

There was a window at one end of the

room, but it gave little light, and, nearing it, Brock instantly discerned why this was so.

It looked out on a court around which arose solidly the closely-knit frontage of four buildings, shutting out both light and air to a great degree.

"Queer place, this," reflected Brock, and then he pressed his face closer to the window and peered hard.

Just below the laundry office was an aperture. From this ran a stout cable. He traced it aloft to a single break in the opposite wall a hundred feet away. Here there was a window, or rather a hole in the even brick surface.

Brock edged close and had to squint sideways to get a view of what was going on below him, for something was, he could tell it by a regular thump-bump of some falling objects.

"Aha!" he murmured finally. "There's the fellow, the clerk in the laundry. What is he doing? Oh, I see. He's dumping the bundles he dumped so magically into the partition case into an enormous big basket."

This basket, capacious enough to hold half a dozen men, was attached to the slanting cable by little wheels, and from its front ran a rope along the cable and over a pulley, it seemed, at a dimly outlined window in the third story of the opposite building.

The clerk was filling this basket with the parcels he had received during the evening. They jarred noisily together, and the interested Brock was more puzzled and anxious than ever to guess what their contents might be.

The man seemed to have completed his task of loading up the basket, for he retired from below. A grating closed noisily after him. Brock heard him re-enter the office up stairs. There he manipulated some mechanism that sounded a signal over in the building across the court, for a faint tinkle echoed from that direction.

"There is some way of getting out of this room besides the panel, of course," theorized Brock, "but I'll risk no more traps. No, I'll keep my eye on that basket. There she goes."

The guide rope began to slack and the

cable bellied just here. The basket started an ascent of the sharp slant.

Some one up at the distant window was pulling it up. Brock watched it fade and vanish.

Perhaps fifteen minutes went by. He fancied he caught occasional gleams of light beyond the aperture that had received the basket. Then those died out, and with a swish the basket came sliding back—empty.

Brock was intensely interested. He hoped that he was on a trail that would end with the discovery of the man from Klondike and Don. Even if there was no positive promise of the sort, however, he would follow out the present adventure, he decided.

Ever on the alert for crooked work, he was certain that such was in progress here, and hopeful but curious, he formulated a bold plan of learning more about the strange laundry and its strange way of doing business.

Brock examined the window he stood at. It took him five minutes to do what had to be done—lift it and get down into the yard. He now found himself in a prison—walls and grating shut him in. "There's no going back," he determined. "I'm going to see where that basket went to by following it." Gyp wriggled inside his coat as Brock started on a voyage of risk and uncertainty. Brock had concluded to ascend the cable spanning the court. He got into the basket, got the run of the ropes, and was soon sailing obliquely across the dark open space.

He sent back the basket as soon as he stepped out of it into a room with nothing in it.

"What has become of the plunder just sent over?" he questioned. "I must get new track or sight of that, it seems, in order to keep on the correct trail."

Brock proceeded very slowly and very cautiously, for he was wary of trick panels, trap chairs and the like.

It took him quite a time to learn that the room he was in had only one exit, a door, and this was impregnable. It was studded with bolts driven through heavy timbers, and provided with locks massive as those of a jail.

Just enough of the night light came in to show outlines, and it showed Gyp,

whom he had set down, investigating every nook and corner industriously as himself.

"Found something?" queried Brock, as Gyp uttered a low but significant growl.

Brock went to where the little animal had posted himself. It was where a circular hole showed.

Brock felt into this. A smooth metal surface met his touch.

"It's a pipe, a twenty-two inch galvanized iron pipe," he decided. "Ah!" he continued, squinting keenly past an open crack where it came through the brick work. "I see. There's another court, and thirty feet across it is another building. Do they shoot the laundry packages through this? I guess that's it. Well, I never heard of such a roundabout course as these fellows take to deliver goods. There must be a big deal at the end of it.

Brock had now traced the laundry packages through two buildings. He prepared to enter the third.

He crept into the pipe. It was rusted and creaked. As he reached its centre, directly over the middle of the new court, he experienced a quick thrill. "It's bending, it's breaking!" he fluttered.

He now decided that the bundles might have been sent through the pipe, but not the man who received them. He had probably disappeared through the iron-studded door Brock had noticed.

"Gyp!" spoke Brock warningly, and the dog pattered back right up to him.

"It's giving!" breathed Brock. "I can feel it, inch by inch. It's jointed, and the centre section of pipe is dropping. Whew! Too bad! I'm booked for a fall. Off the reel—my clock's stopped!"

Brock thought so, but made a forward plunge. Two sections of the pipe came apart, and he flopped down. He heard a hideous jangle in the stone-paved court below, grabbed out, and as Gyp clutched at his shoulder and clung there, he caught a dangling wire that shot across the swaying upper section of the pipe, and flopped with a crash against the opposite wall.

This steadying wire was wrapped around the pipe overhead. It sent him so forcibly down and sideways, that one foot

struck the sash of a window and snapped a pane of glass.

"There's a safe perch," soliloquized Brock, "and just in time, for the wire is giving."

He managed to lower himself to a stone sill. Pressing his hands against the sash beyond it he threw it up, dropped into a dark room, and sank to the floor panting and slightly unnerved from his recent curdling experience.

"I wonder if this is the final den?" he mused. "Ah! the noise has disturbed somebody. Voices overhead? I want to get out of here, or I'll be traced. Door? Good. Corridor? Yes."

Brock groped his way from the apartment he had landed in, down a hall, and into another room.

This he started to cross to what he fancied was a window. He half hesitated as his feet seemed to slide.

An innate sense made him feel that he was penetrating forbidden and, therefore, possibly guarded territory.

He knew it as his foot seemed to touch a plank set for intruders. Something dropped and he tilted forward.

Whiz!—he seemed scudding down a greased toboggan slide with lightning-like velocity.

Splash!—he landed in water up to the neck, went under, and with a frightened yelp little Gyp went under with him.

CHAPTER X.

THE GOLD MAKERS.

Brock had studied up on the tricks and traps of the criminal classes of New York city, and at once suspected his environment.

He was in one of those secret dens trebly guarded, provided with pitfalls for the intruder.

The bell chair proved this, and his last thrilling slide for life enforced the conviction.

As he came to the surface of what seemed to be a large cistern ten feet deep, he struck out boldly and reached its edge just as Gyp paddled thither himself.

"Shot down two stories," calculated Brock. "Over we go to dry land, old fellow," and he dropped to a hard dirt floor the dog in one arm. "S-st! A light."

Brock did not even dare to shake the drippings from his drenched form, and Gyp took the cue and miserably endured the discomfort of a like sogginess.

Various glints of light had attracted Brock's attention. He advanced slowly, cautiously, and each step convinced him that he was on the threshold of some tangible discovery as to the laundry mystery at last.

He came bolt up against a frame partition. Its cracks were moderately wide. He looked through one of them.

"Oh, but I'm in luck!" he breathed in an overjoyed ecstasy.

That was the "professional" of it. Brock forgot wet and chill, risk and peril in that thrilling glow which comes only to the true detective when, after pursuing a tortuous road, he finds that it has landed him squarely up against his game.

The next room was lighted. In its centre were benches and tools. In one corner was a small forge. Near it, set down in an iron standard under which a lot of lighted gas jets were playing, was a crucible.

What fascinated Brock's glance, however, was a sight of two familiar forms.

Bending over the crucible which steamed with some simmering mass was—the man from Klondike.

In an attitude of ecstasy, a few feet away, his old eyes lit up with what resembled fanatical zeal, his nervous hands clasping and unclasping as if he was trembling on the crisis of his life, was old Amos Sherman.

Dunbar gave the mass in the kettle a stir with a long metal spoon.

"Nearly at the culminating point, my friend," he said to Sherman, slapping him familiarly on the shoulder.

"Oh, it is wonderful!" quavered the old man.

"Isn't it?"

"Magical! Since the day I so fortunately found you, I have waited for this moment."

"Ah," smiled back Dunbar, his eye twinkling shrewdly, "didn't I tell you? Didn't I say I wouldn't pick up the armful of nuggets, the spadeful of dust lying just outside my cabin door in Alaska for the trouble of lugging them East——"

"Because——"

"Because I had a better thing."

"Oh, infinitely better!"

"I had discovered a secret——"

"The mystery of the ages—the marvel of the universe."

Sherman's enthusiasm was so vivid as to be absolutely painful.

He hung on the words of his companion as fervently as if he was some prophet, and he a devotee who weighed his every utterance as more precious than priceless treasure.

"They're working a regular opium-dream game on this old man, whatever it is," murmured the peering and listening Brock.

"I said I had a better thing," resumed the man from Klondike.

"You did, indeed."

"I had discovered——"

"The lost art, the aim of the alchemists of dead ages, a way to make gold!"

"Well!" commented Brock, his mind expanding to sudden enlightenment. "That's the dodge, is it?"

Yes, the secret was out. Whatever he hoped to gain from it, however he planned to work it, Croesus J. Dunbar was setting up the old, ever-dazzling scheme that has so often blinded wiser men than old Amos Sherman.

"I told you I needed an associate, a reputable, responsible business man," went on Dunbar.

"That was me. I furnished four thousand dollars—hard to get, but I managed it—to buy the——"

"The ingredients, the precious powder that cost a fortune. I got it. I gave you back the first product."

"A gold brick, a pure gold brick, a solid gold brick!" raved Sherman, indescribably excited. "I tested it. I sold it. I can sell a thousand more. Oh, we shall be——"

"Rothschilds."

The old man nearly had a fit. He hugged himself, crowing like a delighted child over a bauble.

"And you said I should, to-night, out of a ten-dollar pinch of this wonderful mixture of yours, see how you make the precious stuff," cried Sherman, "and it's there. In the crucible. Boiling."

"It is. You saw me put in the powder, then some lead. I stir. It's ready. Hand

me that ladle. Hold it steady while I pour. Why, you're shaking like an aspen, man!"

"I'm athrill with glory. Gold! gold! gold! We shall own the world. We'll pave the streets with it! Beautiful yellow brightness—I could kiss you, I could drink you, boiling hot."

"Better not try it," laughed Dunbar.

With a pair of pincers he seized the crucible, and tilted it into the ladle which Sherman held. The latter moved toward a bench where a square mold lay, filled it with the yellow mass, and then stood with ecstatic eyes watching it sizzle and cool.

"There's a gold brick—let me see, cost, fifteen dollars, value, three thousand dollars, and made before your very eyes," declared Dunbar. "I can turn out twenty a day."

"Oh, it's grand."

"You are to sell them, keeping close the secret as to where and how you get them."

"Trust me."

"At first you will turn the money in here till we have—oh, say a matter of fifty thousand dollars as floating capital."

"Any way you like—you know best—your word is law."

Dunbar dropped the mold into a pail of water. He presented the cooled off brick of gold to Sherman.

"Wrap it up, sell it to-morrow, keep mum, and turn the proceeds over to the messenger I send to you to-morrow night with half a dozen more," he directed.

"All right," nodded the dazzled and satisfied Sherman.

Brock watched Dunbar lead his dupe—for such he must be—to a stairway, and they disappeared.

Brock stood staring vaguely through the partition cracks. His eyes were puzzled, his mind bothered.

"Bless me!" he confessed, blankly, "if I can see through all this! They're making gold, real, genuine gold now. Where does the swindle come in?"

CHAPTER XI.

THE SECRET OUT.

Brock crouched low as he heard returning footsteps. Like a person turning the page of a book to begin a new chapter in

a tale of entrancing interest, he scanned the room just vacated, now filled up again.

He tallied off mentally the new-comers. Old man Sherman had undoubtedly been sent home. Dunbar had some new companions now.

One was the man who had brought the laundry package from the Virden Hotel, the other—Brock's pulses took a jump, and his eyes snapped—the other was his friend, the owner of Gyp, the sender of the mutilated note—Nick Carter's latest protegee—Don.

"Got rid of the old guy?" asked the man Brock had shadowed hither.

"Yes; tickled to death, and would swear that I made pure gold out of a pinch of powder and a slab of lead," returned Dunbar, with a chuckle.

"You mean a lead-foiled slab of gold."

"He'll never guess it. Oh, he's dead easy. Now then, Duffin, we've just got things in splendid working order."

"You have, for a fact, Dwyer. Think of the way we're fixed—think of the route a detective would have to take to get, even to the building we're in. He'd have to run the gantlet of the laundry, the aerial basket route, the next building, the iron pipe. Say, I guess the pipe broke of its own weight."

"Why, of course. You don't suppose anybody could penetrate that far without setting off some of our numerous warnings, do you?" demanded Dunbar.

"Even if they got here, look at that door overhead. Trebly locked on the lower side. Now then, what's the programme?"

"Work."

"That suits me."

"Lots of supplies on hand?"

"Say, the word's gone out to the profesh that they can drop their 'laundry' here, get a check, return next night and cash it in for eighty per cent. of full weight, instead of dodging the police and dealing with treacherous pawnbrokers, as they have been doing, and they're fairly swamping us. Why, we're going to transact a regular land-office business, we are."

"This wholesale fence idea is an English importation," announced Dunbar. "I expect to get rich on it in six months,

lay very low, and get away before the police even suspect I'm alive."

"Capital!"

"Fence? That means a place where they receive stolen goods. The way that fellow says 'laundry' is sort of opening my eyes," soliloquized the raptly-listening Brock, speculatively. "Set this young fellow at work, Duffin," directed Dunbar, indicating Don. "I needed just such a helper, and we'll not let him see daylight again till we're ready to break and run."

"You want to get some stuff ready to melt?"

"All of it. You see, I promised our agent, Sherman, a lot of bricks to-morrow night. He can sell without exciting suspicion, being so respectable, and therefore get full prices."

"Hey!" spoke the man Duffin, approaching Don.

"He can't hear, and he's dumb, as well," explained Dunbar. "Show him."

"All right. Come along," and Duffin caught Don's arm and motioned him to follow him.

Brock scanned his friend narrowly. He read the skilful part of a deaf mute he was playing. Don's face wore a regular pan-of-milk expression.

Dunbar lounged at a bench while his accomplice led Don away. They came into the space where Brock was, and the latter crouched behind some boxes.

He was on pins and needles of active anxiety. Gyp was quivering strangely. Brock had hidden the little animal's head in his coat the minute he caught sight of Don, fearing some demonstration, but for all that, Gyp, by some mysterious telepathic sense, seemed to scent his master's presence.

The man Duffin had brought a candle with him. He went to the door of a closely partitioned off-room in a far corner.

As he threw it back Brock stared with open mouth. A spectacle greeted him both wonderful and enlightening.

In one corner lay a lot of paper wrappings. They were certainly those which had enveloped the packages delivered at the street laundry office earlier in the evening.

In another corner was a heap—a glare, a glitter, a heterogeneous mass of radi-

ance and richness that seemed to represent every trinket, ornament and utility in which the precious metals are employed.

There were gold and silver servers, cream jugs, knives, forks, card receivers; there were cane heads, parasol crooks, penholders, pencils; there were chains, guards, watches, lockets, rings, velvet cases, leather cases, filagree cases. If the contents of some tremendously big pawnshop had been dumped here, the aspect would have exactly duplicated the present ensemble.

Against the wall sat half a dozen steel-bound leather cases. Brock could guess that they probably contained some dinner service of fabulous value.

The man Duffin set the candle on a box and picked up a ring. He had a chisel in his hand, and he pried out a jewel as if it was a lump of coal, tossed it into an empty keg, and put the gold band into another.

He indicated, by showing him, that Don was thus to separate ornaments and settings, placing gold and silver in different heaps.

Brock was fairly stunned at the layout. He understood every detail of Dunbar's scheme now.

"He's started an immense fence for stolen goods," he surmised. "Through honest old Amos Sherman he gets rid of this stuff, melted down, at full rates, without police interference. Those 'laundry' customers are all thieves. Nick Carter was right—Velvet Foot Dwyer, alias the man from Klondike, is, indeed, up to no ordinary game!"

To bag this outfit! Oh, what a case—what a triumph! Brock set his wits at double gallop thinking gait.

Don sat down and began the work assigned him. In the next room the two conspirators huddled at a work bench over a game of cards.

"We've got an hour or two of leisure, let's enjoy ourselves till time to start up the melting furnace," suggested Dunbar.

Brock put in the hardest half-hour's thinking he had ever engaged in. A dozen heroic plans suggested themselves to his mind—of creeping on the unsuspecting criminals, downing them, getting Don to assist him.

But the house up stairs was probably

full of accomplices—it was a pitfall course to the street.

"I'll get at Don. I'll let him know that I'm here," decided Bruck. "Hello! hello!"

At that very moment he saw Don creep from the treasure room.

He glided clear down the length of the partition, he pulled loose a board, slipped through the aperture and made for the stairs.

The engrossed cardplayers never noticed him. In fact, the gloom shrouded Don pretty well, and he worked noiselessly.

"Whatever is he up to?" puzzled Brock.

A ring containing three keys hung at the side of the stairway, and this Don took down.

He seemed to be securing as many locks on the stout steel trap-door Duffin had bragged about.

Then he descended, put the keys in his pocket, flashed back to the treasure room the way he had come, pulled its door closely to after him, and Brock sat quivering in a maze of speculation and suspense.

"Don has locked them in," he breathed. "Why?"

He must make his presence known to his spry, clever colleague, Brock decided, after a quarter of an hour of irresolution.

He glanced at the cardplayers in the next room. They were absorbed in their game.

He got up, and in getting up for the first moment since Don had entered the cellar, he let Gyp poke his head out of confinement.

The animal wriggled like a creature weary of restraint, and slipped from Brock's arms before he could prevent the movement.

"Gyp! Gyp!" called the frantic Brock, in a hoarse whisper.

He fairly shook with dread as Gyp bounded away.

One note of alarm would arouse the quick suspicions of Dunbar and his associate.

Gyp seemed to know just where to find his master.

Pell-mell, hooty-scoot, with a plaintive, eager little whine, Gyp darted for the treasure room.

He nosed at the door and managed to push it ajar.

About to rush in, the little animal struck an attitude on the threshold that was mystifying.

The nervous ears dropped, the whole canine frame covered.

Like a human being suddenly confronted with some startling apparition, little Gyp sank down with a resounding howl of distress and terror.

What had happened?

CHAPTER XII.

SHUT IN.

"What's that?"

The minute Gyp let out that mournful yelp, the man from Klondike and his companion in the next apartment sprang to their feet.

Brock knew they were alarmed, but for all that he ventured to press forward toward the treasure room. The actions of the dog had excited his curiosity and surprise alike.

Brock glided up to its door. At the threshold, like Gyp, he stood rooted blankly.

He had positively seen Don enter that apartment less than half an hour ago, and he had not left it by the door since.

Don was no longer there!

He had seen, at his last glimpse, gold, silver and jewels.

Gold, silver and jewels were no longer there!

All, all had disappeared—there were the heaps of paper that had inclosed the laundry packages, the candle burned brightly, but boy and treasure were gone.

With a queer, uncanny feeling, Brock retreated as he caught warning sounds behind him.

He saw Dunbar and his companion coming hastily forward, candles in their hands, and with a whispered, coaxing call to Gyp glided among some empty boxes.

One was tipped so he could crowd into it and glance through a break in its bottom. Brock was provoked that the dog had not followed him.

"I say," spoke the man Duffin, coming up to the door of the treasure room, "it's—a dog."

"It's what?" demanded Dunbar, with a stare.

"A dog. Why! there was no dog here. Say! we let in no dog."

"We didn't," answered Dunbar, slowly, "but I've seen that same animal before. Our dumb helper had it. I think it must have slipped in with him."

"Where is your dumb helper?" cried Duffin.

"Sure enough—he isn't in there, and——"

"Where's the plunder?"

By rapid gradations, from surprise to wonder, and then to stupefaction, to alarm, the two conspirators ran the gamut of an excitement terminating in a wild scurrying for every nook and corner of the place.

It was when—having satisfied themselves that Don had in some mysterious way got away, and had in some still more mysterious way caused the vanishment of an immense amount of treasure—they came to the head of the stairs, that a climax was announced that turned them into frenzied, frightened men.

"The door is locked—three times—the key gone. Your deaf mute never went this way!" shouted Duffin.

"He must have."

"How could he, and it locked on the under side? Dwyer, it's a trap. You've been duped!"

"But he couldn't take wings and fly."

"He's gone, isn't he? Oh, we're in a nice pickle! Plenty of signals running to this room, none from it. Dolts that we are, and you ordered the boys overhead to the main room to enjoy themselves, and pay no attention to us. We might hammer and yell till we're hoarse. We're boxed! We're caged!"

The speaker ran across Gyp here. The dog seemed to instinctively recognize him as an enemy, and snapped at him.

Duffin raised his foot, and gave the little animal a kick that sent it ten feet away.

Brock, gazing from his point of espionage, could scarcely restrain himself from bursting forth, and facing the brutal assailant of his dumb friend.

The next minute, however, Brock had all he could do looking after his own affairs.

Poking into every rubbish heap, and turning over every barrel and box, the

two searchers reached the box in which Brock was concealed.

Duffin gave it a turn with his hand. Over it went, and up to his feet in a flash bobbed Brock, prepared for a crisis he had just foreseen.

"Hands up!"

The amazed conspirators fell back with dropping jaws.

Brock had been told by Nick Carter to always carry a revolver whenever he went on a shadow, and this he had promptly drawn.

As the two men retreated a step or two, and stood against a work bench that came to the stone wall, Brock leveled the weapon steadily.

"Who—who are you?" blared the startled Duffin.

"Never mind. I'm here. See here, gentlemen, I never fired a pistol in my life, much less hurt any one, but if you make a move to get the better of me, or get away from the place where you are standing, I will certainly fire, and I will fire to some purpose."

The man from Klondike looked annoyed, his companion flushed as red as a turkey at being thus duped by one boy, and held at bay by another.

"You act as if you mean business," spoke the smooth Dunbar, after a strained pause.

"I guess I do," vouchsafed Brock. "I am going to ask one of you to tie the other, and it's going to be done, or—don't you try to draw any weapon!" he interrupted, sternly, as Duffin lowered one hand.

"Oh, I guess I can stretch myself!" growled Duffin, with a frightful scowl.

He leaned one arm back on the work bench carelessly. Brock got ready to resume dictating his terms to his captives, when Duffin showed himself to be a man of resources.

With great dexterity and swiftness, he grabbed up backhanded a little iron crowbar, lying within reach on the work bench.

Back he swung it to hurl, with deadly precision, at the head of his captor.

Quick as was the movement, Brock anticipated his peril, and dodged.

The missile skimmed his head, but it was accompanied by a sharp crash.

He discerned that in lifting it, Duffin had struck with its point and broken one of half a dozen gallon glass bottles ranged on a shelf over the bench, undoubtedly containing chemical acid employed in Dunbar's gold-making or gold-melting operations.

A flood of liquid poured out, and as it struck bench and floor, it gave forth strong, dense fumes.

"Duffin!" shouted Dunbar, in unmistakable tones of terror, "the acid! Do you know what you have done? Shut into this close place—to choke—in poisonous fumes—ah—we—are—lost!"

Brock saw the gold-maker stagger as if struck. Duffin choked, and tried to dart away from the proximity of the noxious gas generated by the released liquid.

As both men reeled and sank to the floor spluttering, convulsing, paralyzed, Brock himself experienced a dizzy, burning sensation.

He retreated to the treasure room—the fumes pursued him. He closed the door—they permeated the cracks.

"Where has Don got to?" cried Brock, in a vivid frenzy of doubt and fear—"how did he get out—how can we escape?"

Gyp, who had followed him, sank trembling to his side.

"I'm choking—the fumes!" murmured Brock, in a lost tone, and reeled to the floor a senseless heap.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CASE ENDED.

"It's a good thing I'm strong!"

"Eh?" projected Brock.

He heard the words in a familiar tone, that of Don; then he was conscious that Don was carrying him, that Gyp was poising on his own shoulder, and that they both had been spirited away in some marvelous manner from the den of the gold-makers.

A rushing sound of water greeted Brock's vague hearing, and the air was chill and dense.

Splashes gave back a hollow echo.

"Don," projected Brock, "where are we?"

"Can't you guess?"

"No—in some underground vault?"

"We are threading a great central sewer of the city."

"Why? how? when? where?"

"Why, how, when, where, yourself!" returned Don, halting and letting his burden slip to his feet and steady himself against a slimy, rounding brick wall. "How did you come in that place?"

"It's a long story."

"And mine is a short one. I discovered a disguised manhole cover in the treasure room."

"And threw the gold and silver into it?"

"Pounds at a time."

"And got away yourself?"

"Returned for a candle, and found you and Gyp dead knocked out. What was the matter? Were they poisoning you?"

Brock recited the episode of the shattered acid jar.

"It's too bad to leave even those desperadoes to die," spoke Don, "but we'll hope they'll only be stupefied. Anyway, I couldn't find my way back. I've carted you through a bewildering maze of branch sewers. Will we never find an opening?"

Brock could hardly realize their peculiar situation. Don lit a candle and revealed a grewsome environment.

Then they splashed on, sometimes ankle-deep in slime, sometimes knee-deep.

"There's a glimmer," spoke Brock, suddenly.

They made for the glint of light discovered; they halted under a grating apparently fronting some public street corner, but two feet out of reach.

"Hold Gyp," directed Don. He fumbled in his pocket for a minute or two, made a spring, caught at one of the grating bars and clung there.

Brock, watching him engrossedly, saw him apply something metallic to his lips.

It was a whistle, and out there rang on the still, startled night air that shrill, piercing signal that is always alarming and heeded—the urgency call of the metropolitan police.

"Pwhat's this?" sounded a challenging voice two minutes later, and Don saw a bulky, blue-coated, brass-buttoned form hover near the grating.

"Two boys in a sewer."

"I'm drameing!"

"Don't go to asleep, that's all," called

Don, sharply. "We're in a fix. Break out the grating."

"Me, is it? I'll be getting a blacksmith."

"No, you mustn't waste time. Give me your club."

"My!" gasped the goggling, watching Brock below, eyes directed above.

Don's splendid strength had come into play once more.

Snap went a bar as he pressed his muscular fist across the club, set as a lever.

Out emerged three forlorn-looking objects five minutes later—Don, Brock, Gyp.

"Any more?" stared the officer, looking as if he expected a whole menagerie to follow.

"Officer," spoke Don, all business, "have you ever heard of Nick Carter?"

"Have I? Don't I know him well?"

"We are friends—that is, assistants, pupils of his."

"Oho!"

"We are on an important case."

"Aha!"

"That's how we came in that sewer."

"Wirra! you don't say so?"

"Listen, officer," pursued Don, rapidly. "Do two things for me, will you? To help the cause of justice."

"Won't I!"

"Telephone Nick Carter to come here at once—send for a police squad."

"I'll do just that."

The officer hurried boy and dog into a drugstore. They sat down to rest and wait.

Brock was still dizzy-headed from his recent hard experiences, and the next half hour passed like a dream.

A patrol wagon drove up. He and Don bundled into it. Then he heard Nick Carter's voice. They rattled over the hard pavements, and halted before the same laundry office he had entered earlier in the evening.

Brock got up to follow the others into the building. Nick Carter pushed him back to the patrol wagon seat.

"You've played your act, Brock," he said. "Take the first cab that passes and go straight home. Do you understand?"

"But, Mr. Carter——"

"You're not able to sit straight with

that dizzy head. You do as I say. We'll pick up the loose threads here." Brock was surprised to find that he was glad to obey his patron.

The noxious fumes left a dull, sickening effect.

In fact, he was so sleepy and confused that the next morning when he awoke in bed at Nick Carter's house, he could barely recall getting there.

But Brock was bright enough now, and he grew brighter as he heard the brisk voices of the detective and Don down stairs.

He dressed hurriedly and descended, to be greeted warmly by Nick, Don and Gyp.

"Why, what are those?" inquired Brock, pointing to half a dozen steel-bound leather cases ranged against the wall.

They were scraped and wet, and looked as if they had gone through some recent hard usage.

"Part of the plunder Don threw in the sewer——" began Nick.

"Oh, yes, I remember seeing them at the gold-makers' den. Tell me about it, Don."

Don was too modest to obey, but the detective explained how the police had penetrated to the secret lair of the conspirators, had captured all hands, including the man from Klondike and Duffin, who were found unconscious, but not in danger, the poisonous fumes of the acid having dissipated, only drugging them.

"We recovered all the gold and silver," explained Nick, "turning it over to the police—all except these cases."

"And these?" spoke Brock, curiously.

"There's your answer."

Nick nodded toward the hall. A sudden commotion had sounded there.

"Oh, Mr. Carter! dear Mr. Carter! where are you? Is it true? Have you indeed recovered the plunder—the plate of my fathah-in-law?"

The aristocratic "chappie" Brock had seen once before burst into the room.

"There's the plate," answered Nick, pointing to the cases ranged along the wall. "Thank these two young gentlemen for their recovery."

The scion of wealth uttered a delighted scream. He was talking big about checks,

and rewards, and gratitude, as Nick bundled him off to adjust things with the pawnbroker so he could prove a clear claim to the recovered plate.

"I hope it will be a lesson to him to act square after this," said the detective. "It don't pay to be crooked,, and maybe he'll realize it. Certainly Old Amos Sherman will. He has learned the hard lesson that all is not gold that glitters, and that you can't get something for nothing in this world. Well, boys, you have earned great renown. The chasing down of Velvet Foot Dwyer is a feat worthy the genius of a Vidocq."

"Don't include me," insisted Brock. "I only watched Don, and—he's taught me more than I ever knew before. All honor to Nick Carter's clever protege!"

"Nonsense!" dissented the embarrassed Don. "I only followed my nose. Who directed me? You, Brock, the best and truest friend I ever had!"

"Hold on!" broke in Nick Carter, smilingly. "Here's another claimant for some of the credit."

The detective lifted up the wriggling, frisking Gyp.

"We'll enroll him, sure," promised Nick Carter. "He deserves a share of the honor."

"Yes," nodded Brock, energetically. "Gyp certainly helped in tracing down the man from Klondike!"

[THE END.]

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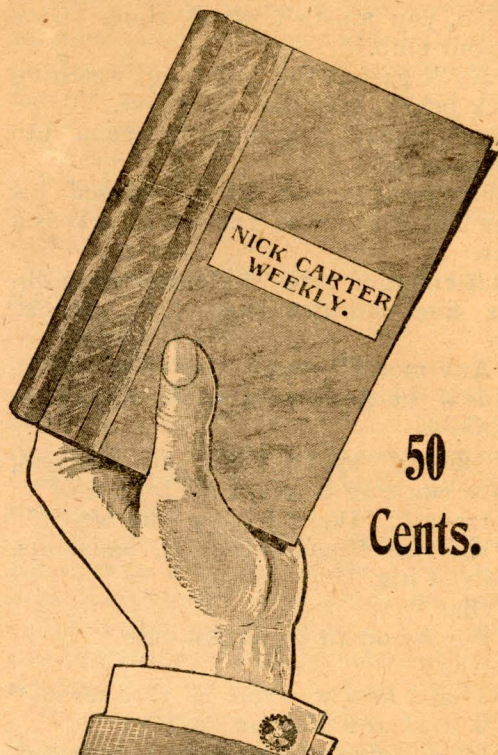
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